Leialoha Humpherys
Filia and the Fall Festival
A Little Mermaid Retelling
Autumn Fairy Tales

FILIA AND THE FALL FESTIVAL

A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

AUTUMN FAIRY TALES

LEIALOHA HUMPHERYS

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The Autumn Fairy Tales
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Also by Leialoha Humpherys
About the Author

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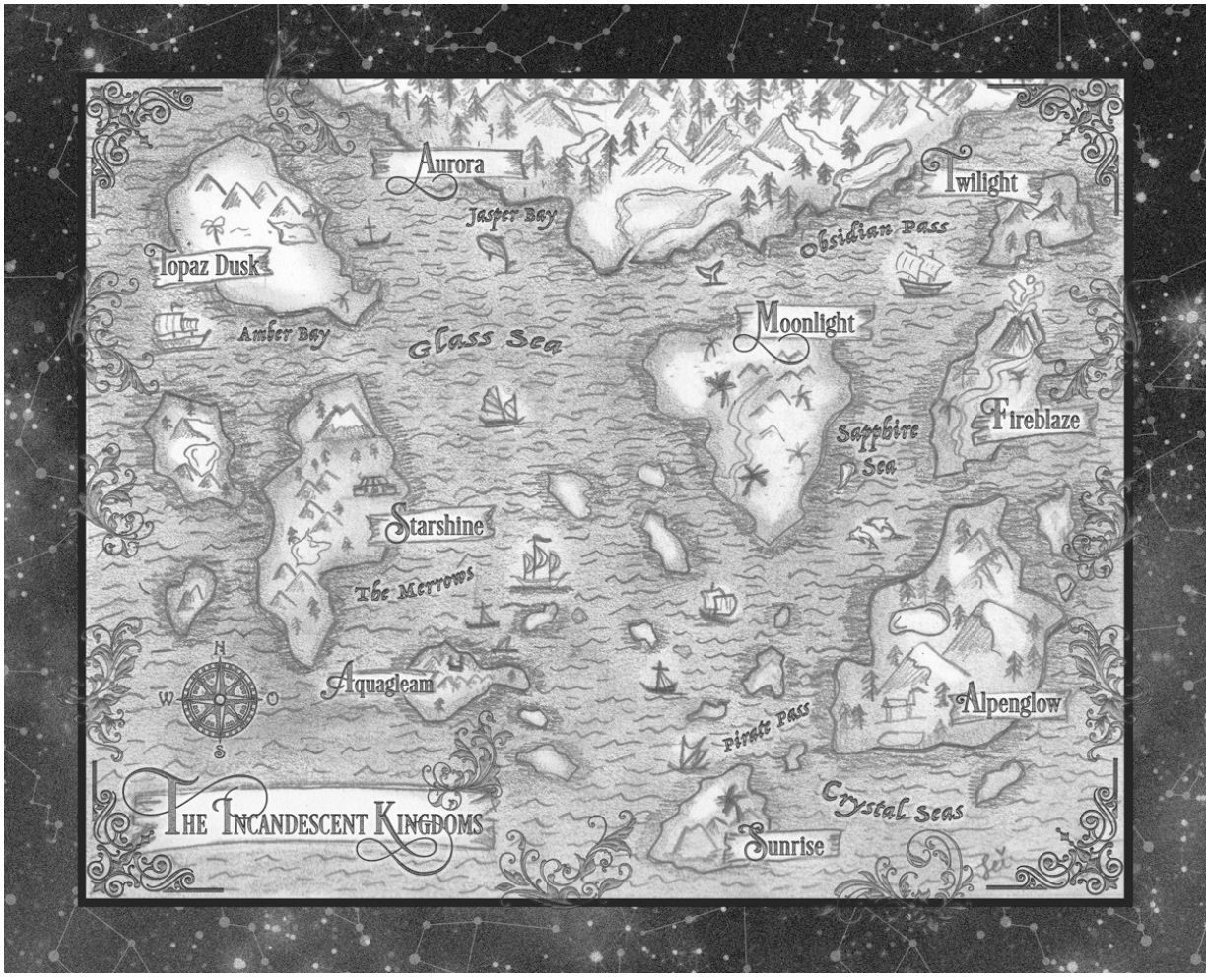
To my sisters, my hearties Kamele and Esther, who love fall as much as me
🧡

Map of the Incandescent Kingdoms



CHAPTER 1

As the ship pulled into the port at Alpenglow Kingdom, I couldn't believe my eyes. The mountains and forests practically glowed. It was like looking at a rainbow, but not a bright, colorful one like in the islands. It was a warm, rich palette of cozy burgundy, sepia, gold, and amber.

"The trees are really that color?" I mused aloud, and the captain of the ship nodded.

"Yes, your highness."

I couldn't stop staring. Who knew autumn was so beautiful? The crisp air blew around us, causing me to wrap my cloak tighter.

If only Iosefa could see this. He was supposed to be here, not me. Iosefa, my oldest brother and King of Sunrise Kingdom, had come down with an illness I'd never seen before. Not only did he have chills and a fever, but it was followed by a cough and headaches. The doctors said it might be the Crimson Cough, a disease going around the Incandescent Kingdoms, but I'd treated victims of the cough and it wasn't that. In all my years as a princess nurse, his condition was odd, and it took a great deal of convincing for me to leave him.

"Finally, we're here." A voice distracted me from my thoughts and an older woman stood by me, looking at the beautiful view of the kingdom. Red and orange-covered mountains rose for miles, a backdrop for the stone

castle that stood among the distant trees and reflected in a glistening lake below.

“Yes, we’ve arrived,” I said, just as eager as the woman to get off the ship. I loved sailing, but my legs grew weary from the constant rocking. I lifted my chin to ignore the pain that occasionally plagued my legs.

I’ll be fine, I told myself. And I’d take breaks during the trip, if my legs needed them.

“Hopefully our trip goes by quickly,” said the woman, her tone cold and her pose rigid. She was Aunty Taimane, the mother of my betrothed, Tevita. He was an older chief who lived across the island of Sunrise Kingdom. Aunty Taimane wasn’t really related, but as was the custom of our island people, I called her Aunty.

That would change once I married her son. My marriage to him was symbolic, as it preserved the island blood of our people. Not that intermarriage was a bad thing—my younger sister, Heilani, was married to Prince Jax from Alpenglow Kingdom, but my father, the late king, always wanted some of his children to marry chiefs within the islands of Sunrise Kingdom.

I opened my mouth to reply, but nothing came out.

I hope this trip is enjoyable, I thought, *And goes by slowly.* Because this felt like my last trip of being free and single, Once I returned from the trip, Tevita and I would marry, and I’d move to a remote part of Sunrise Kingdom, never traveling or seeing the Incandescent Kingdoms like this again.

“It’s so cold,” the woman continued. Her constant complaints during the journey had been tiring, but I always smiled and said something positive to counter it.

“It’s so beautiful though. Look at those colors.”

“Your hair is a mess. You’ve been standing out in the wind too long,” the woman said. “You better get yourself presentable before we dock.”

“Yes, Aunty Taimane.” I inhaled slowly to keep my impatient thoughts at bay, then hurried inside to fix my hair and self before arriving.

The Fall Festival, I thought to myself as I whipped it back into a loose bun. *This is so exciting!* Sunrise Kingdom and Alpenglow Kingdom had worked together during the Pirate Wars, so we invited the royals of each kingdom to large celebrations like this. For example, when we, at Sunrise Kingdom, celebrated the *Makahiki*, we invited the royals from Alpenglow.

When they had their Fall Festival, they invited the royals from Sunrise. It showed that we were more than just allies because of war. We were friends.

When I returned to the deck, the sailors had lowered the anchor and begun putting the ramp out. Aunty Taimane gave me a look with her dark eyes, and I felt her judgment on every part of me: my brown eyes, brown skin, sun-kissed hair, and rosy cheeks. She once said I was too small and skinny for her son, Tevita, but after I became a nurse and wrote books about the remedies and plants I used to help soldiers in the Pirate Wars, my name spread throughout all of the Incandescent Kingdoms. It was not long ago that she went to Iosefa and arranged the marriage.

I pulled out my notebook from the woven bag at my side and made a note for later:

Beautiful trees, colors like rubies and gold.

"What is that?"

I shoved the diary back into my pocket, realizing that Aunty Taimane had been watching me.

"Oh. Nothing. Just my notes."

"A diary?"

I bit my lower lip and nodded. I wasn't one to lie…

Except for one thing. It was a secret I told no one, except Heilani, my younger sister, when I thought we were going to die. I dug my hand into my pocket, clutching a golden heart-shaped locket. Within the locket was a piece of hair from each of my sisters. We all had a locket with our hair in it. It was just a sisterly thing we did a few years ago, and I carried it with me everywhere. It was a reminder of home, a reminder of my family. I loved them more than anything, but not enough to tell them the entire truth about what happened during the Pirate Wars.

We were all alive and well now, so my secret would die with me and Heilani. Because if my secret somehow escaped, it would change everything for me. If my secret got out, my family and my people would realize… I wasn't a perfect princess.

And that's one thing I can't afford to lose. I'd been the "perfect princess" my whole life, fully knowing that it brought honor to my kingdom, family, and people. My lips regarding my secret were sealed, and one day I'd burn my diary so nobody would find out what I did.

A welcoming company rode on horseback to the dock and I recognized the dark hair of Crown Prince Dawson. I smiled. It would be nice to see him

again, especially after all the adventures we'd been on together.

I licked my lips, reminding myself to not let any of my secrets slip. We'd been on too many adventures together, *whether he knew it or not.*

CHAPTER 2

"Filia!" He dismounted quickly and bowed before opening his arms.

I gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek, which was customary for us island people to do. Dawson had been to Sunrise Kingdom so many times throughout the wars that he was familiar with the way we greeted each other. But instead of letting me go, he held my arms and looked down at me.

"I wasn't expecting to see you—is Iosefa alright?"

"He's really sick," I said, pursing my lips. "The captain had to drag me onto the ship to come."

Dawson chuckled, and self-consciousness overwhelmed me, my princess instincts kicking in.

He shouldn't be holding me like this. His hands were warm on my arms, despite the chilly weather.

This looks bad.

Isn't Dawson betrothed?

"Well, I hope he gets better soon. And I hope you're not too disappointed." He looked straight into my eyes. "I'm glad to see you."

What does that mean?

I smiled innocently. "I am too."

I didn't dare glance at Aunty Taimane, knowing full well that I'd hear an earful from her later about propriety and how a princess should behave, especially when she was betrothed.

Dawson seemed to realize the intimate way he held me, and color rushed up his cheeks. Letting go, he offered me his arm, guiding me to his horse. “How was your trip?”

“It was well,” I said, looking up into his eyes. He always had the nicest eyes, green as a lush tropical forest. How long had it been since I last saw him? A year or so? The last time I saw him we were with our younger siblings, Heilani and Jax, saving them and Aquagleam Kingdom. Dawson and I had fought side by side, and I’d been the one to tend the multiple gunshot wounds Jax received. And after the whole fighting and fiasco to save Aquagleam Kingdom ended, our younger siblings married each other, so, in a way, Dawson and I were like siblings.

But the way he held me earlier felt… different, and if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t always see him as a sibling.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Great, now that you’re here.” He winked and my stomach felt a weird jumping sensation. As if remembering my manners, I introduced him to Aunty Taimane. She’d been standing by Dawson’s large black steed, stroking its nose. She didn’t look like she enjoyed it, but rather that she found the creature unworthy. Sunrise Kingdom was known for having the best, strongest, and smartest breed of horses, so she was probably comparing Dawson’s horse to our horses.

“She’s the mother of my betrothed.”

When I said the words, Dawson’s eyebrows creased. “That’s new,” he said. “When did you get betrothed?”

I forced a smile. “The arrangement was sealed not too long ago.”

He bowed to Aunty Taimane and helped her onto a horse with one of his guards. “We’re short on horses,” he apologized. “Every harvest we loan our horses to the farmers to work in the fields.”

With that, he held out his hands to help me mount his horse. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, debating.

This might look bad.

But Dawson is just a friend.

Before I hesitated for too long, I stepped on his hands and slipped onto the horse. Another wave of self-consciousness came over me, telling me that he would see my feet. Already they hurt from wearing my boots for too long. Not to mention, my feet felt much too cold in this weather.

It's like walking on glass, I thought, then swallowed hard to dispel the discomfort of my feet, which seemed to be wounded and weak no matter what I did for them. Dawson knew nothing, and he wouldn't notice my aching feet. Well, nobody knew a thing about my feet.

Plus I'm wearing boots, I reassured myself, glancing at my brown suede boots to double-check.

I wore a riding dress with a long slit, so my brown leggings showed. I moved the dress part over the leggings, worried that the prince would see below my knees. It was important that I covered most of my legs, or people would notice how odd they looked.

This gesture was not missed by Aunty Taimane. She had been watching me the entire time I got onto the horse and arranged myself. Dawson sat behind me, putting his arms around my waist to take the reins.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, my eye catching hold of the trees throughout the port. Even they were a rich burnt orange color. It was a welcome distraction from my aching feet and my nervousness from being around the prince.

Dawson started the horse at a trot, but noticed me staring. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"Yes. I just can't believe how beautiful it all is," I said. "I didn't know autumn was this magical."

"It is magical," Dawson agreed. "Between the festivities, we should go on a hike to the waterfalls. The views of the forest and mountains just take your breath away."

"I'd love that." I smiled, then recomposed myself when I remembered Aunty Taimane was still watching us, her eyes dark.

"What have you been up to since I last saw you?" Dawson asked. As we passed the people of Alpenglow, they bowed or curtsied to their prince. Some of them waved, like they were friends. Everyone looked busy, but happy… cozy, even. They were bundled up in cloaks, or heavy coats, with scarves and mittens to keep them extra warm.

As we passed an orchard, the sweet smell of apples filled the air. I inhaled a large breath of it.

This is so lovely.

"Filia?"

"Oh um." I cleared my throat.

He laughed. "Nevermind. We can just enjoy the views."

“I’m sorry, Dawson.”

“No, don’t apologize. I like that you’re enjoying autumn. There are some nice things about it, and the festival brings people together in a way nothing else does.” He sighed. “And let’s not forget the food.”

“What’s your favorite fall food?”

“Hands down cinnamon rolls.” He tipped his head, as if thinking. “It’s the only thing that people won’t toss in all that pumpkin spice. Trust me. Everything during fall has pumpkin spice in it.”

I laughed, loving the sound of this word, “pumpkin spice.”

“Have you tried a cinnamon roll before?” Dawson asked.

“No.”

At this, Dawson stopped the horse and leaned forward so he could see my face. “You’re serious?” He was close… too close.

I nudged him away. “Yes. I’m not a liar.” As soon as I said the words, I regretted them. I *was* a liar, especially when it came to hiding my secrets.

Before Dawson could reply, the horse spooked. In the past, I’d been on a spooked horse, but it was nothing in comparison. This horse bucked, and my head reeled as it began galloping straight through the apple orchards. At first, it ran through the row of trees, then it took a sharp right, sending Dawson and me off into the air. The orchard sloped where we fell, but the momentum we’d been riding had us tumbling down with great speed and force.

As soon as I landed on the ground, pain shot through both knees.

Oh no… Ever since *the accident*, my legs weren’t the same. Not only did my feet hurt when I walked on them, but my knees were incredibly sensitive. If they were hit or injured, it caused me great pain to walk.

This is going to ruin the Fall Festival. Would I be able to endure walking and enjoying the fall festivities if every step hurt?

I rolled on my side, and Dawson rolled next to me. Then we stopped with an “oof!”

I opened my eyes to find Dawson on top of me. We were alone in the orchards, a brief moment before Dawson’s guards came after us.

His green eyes poured into mine, our hearts both pounding—both from flying off the horse and… well, something else. Something new.

My stomach swirled in excitement, nervousness, and anxiousness.

“Dawson?” My voice was barely a whisper. I always thought Dawson was a good-looking guy, but nothing quite prepared me for the wave of

emotions at having him this close to me.

He's so handsome.

We've been through so much together.

I had feelings for him once…

Dawson brushed a loose strand of hair from my face, and then his eyes dove to my lips. My heart pounded, realizing that all of this was real. Things were *definitely* different now. Before, when we helped our siblings save Aquagleam Kingdom from pirates, we were friends.

And we have to stay friends. We had royal obligations, though I needed to verify that Dawson was, indeed, betrothed to someone else. But in any case, *I* was betrothed.

So why did I look at his lips?

The sound of the guards approaching caused Dawson to pry himself away from me. He knelt on one knee with his elbow over the other and looked away, his whole face showing a war within himself. But he, like I, was a royal, and we both knew how to cover our emotions.

He took a breath and then reached out a hand. "Are you alright, Filia?"

I took it, my skin tingling when our fingers touched. "I think so." I rubbed my forehead, then squeezed my eyes shut as I attempted to stand.

A million needles shot through my knees and I leaned on Dawson for support.

"Are you injured?" He knelt to check my legs, but I gasped.

"No!" My answer was so loud, it seemed to echo through the trees. Dawson froze, looking up at me. "I mean no. My legs are fine." I tried to stand straight, which shot more pain through my legs. But I bit the inside of my cheek, telling myself to endure it. Dawson offered his arm again, which I took, forcing my hands to stop trembling from the pain in my legs.

"Are you alright, your highness?" The guards dismounted, and Aunty Taimane looked on, nothing but coldness on her face. Did she even care about us, about me?

"Yes," I answered too quickly, while Dawson nodded.

"What happened?" the prince asked, then ran his fingers through his dark hair. "I didn't see anything that would spook the horse, and my horse wouldn't just do something like that to me." He glanced at the direction the horse ran.

"Maybe he doesn't like me?" I asked in a teasing way.

It took a moment for Dawson to get the joke, but then he rolled his eyes, helping me to one of the guard's horses. The guard made his way through the orchards to recover the spooked horse.

Dawson chuckled. "I doubt that. It's hard not to like you, Filia."

As he helped me mount, again, this time he put my foot into the stirrup. His hand gently rubbed up my ankle and it was so brief, nobody would have seen it. But I definitely felt it. As he got on the horse behind me, I knew this was all a bad idea.

Prince Dawson was flirting, whether he knew it or not. And I, being the perfect princess—being the *betrothed* perfect princess—could not engage in this behavior.

Even if I secretly want to…

CHAPTER 3

By the time we reached the castle, I was sure Dawson had me on his mind. He brought up memories from our adventures at Aquagleam, when we both helped my younger sister, Heilani, and his younger brother, Jax, fight off pirates. It was the first time I'd fought next to Dawson as myself, Princess Filia, not dressed up a soldier during the Pirate Wars.

So Dawson knew I could fight and defend myself with a sword, but he just didn't know *how*…

The memories of helping our siblings at Aquagleam Kingdom brought back a slew of emotions, some good, some bad. We had survived… *I* had survived… again. I was lucky to be alive after being in so many battles.

"Where did you learn to fight?" Dawson asked as we dismounted and entered the castle. "I refrained from asking you then because it just didn't seem right but now…" He shook his head. "Do princesses in Sunrise Kingdom learn to spar?"

I had to dodge the question. "No, but…" I frantically searched for any kind of distraction. "What's that smell? It smells *so* good."

"Pumpkin spice." He shrugged. "Come on, let's grab something from the kitchen before seeing father."

"Oh." I stopped him. "We should see your father first. It's only polite." Again, I wouldn't forget my princess manners. Dawson seemed *too* comfortable taking me around, ignoring the fact that his father held the highest position in all of Alpenglow Kingdom.

Dawson tipped his head. “Alright, we’ll grab something after. Anyway, you were saying? How did you learn to fight?”

“Princesses don’t fight,” I said, a lump forming in my throat. I could feel Aunty Taimane’s eye burning into the back of my head as she walked with the guards behind us. “I just…” I licked my lips. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just a natural.”

This didn’t convince Dawson, but we entered the throne room by then. His father was happy to see us and welcomed Aunty Taimane. The whole time, I tried to hide my pain, but standing there was excruciating. I was sure I started sweating, but kept swiping my face to keep my natural, princess-like facade up.

“I’m sorry to hear about your brother,” said the king, Dawson’s father. He didn’t look like Dawson, but more like Jax, with bright blue eyes and gray-white hair. “Is this your first time to the fall festivities, Princess Filia?”

I nodded.

He smiled, and though the king had stern features, he looked gentle at that moment. “Ah, you will love it. I want you to truly experience the Fall Festival so...” He motioned to Dawson. “My son will accompany you your entire trip. It’s only right.” The king wagged his finger at me. “I’ve also read your work, princess. You are a gifted writer. Though I’m no nurse, I read your book just because of the stories you shared.”

Heat rushed up my cheeks. The king was referring to my book, the one I published about all the natural remedies I knew. It was like an encyclopedia of natural healing balms, ointments, and salves for nurses with real-life experiences to illustrate just how effective the medicines could be.

But that book came about because I couldn’t fight in the Pirate Wars. I couldn’t even use my legs or feet for weeks.

After the *accident,* I rode my horse around the entire island of Sunrise Kingdom, meeting with every *kupuna,* elder, and learning the ways of our ancestors. Then I put all that I learned into practice, becoming the best nurse the kingdom had ever seen. I even invented new remedies and ways to treat those with wounds and life-threatening injuries.

If only the king knew *why* I became a nurse…

I bowed. “Thank you, your majesty.”

His eyes glistened. “If you ever feel so inclined to record your stories of the fall festivities of Alpenglow Kingdom, we would cherish it. Your stories are truly a masterpiece.”

This time I blushed at the compliment. “Thank you, your majesty.”

The king then instructed his son on some of the things he wanted me to experience: the autumn dance, harvest, apple picking, and more. He ended with a reminder. “Ah, and Dawson, I just received word that your intended will be coming.”

A mixture of jealousy and anxiety swirled through my stomach, and Dawson’s green eyes darkened.

So Dawson is betrothed.

“She is? I thought she wasn’t going to make it.”

“Princess Yesenia said she is feeling well enough to.” The king tipped his head. “Though you will escort Filia, please make time for your betrothed.”

Dawson bowed. “Yes, father.”

I knew Princess Yesenia… she was supposed to marry the king of the newest Incandescent Kingdom, Topaz Dusk. Yet the king fell in love with one of her subjects and married her instead.

So Princess Yesenia was now set to marry Dawson? I knew I shouldn’t feel irritated, but the fact gnawed me to the core. She had a reputation for being unkind, and when I did happen to speak with her at balls, she was nothing but negative. People said she had some sort of disorder so her outlook on life had changed over the years. I knew better than to judge, but I pursed my lips.

Dawson deserves better. It irked me that I would have to see her. But it irked me more that I would have to see her *with* Dawson.

I swallowed hard to dispel the thought. *I’m betrothed. He’s betrothed.* Though Dawson would escort me through the festivities, we were just friends.

The king excused us, and it was then that Aunty Taimane asked to be escorted to her room.

“Are you tired?” Dawson asked after we watched Aunty Taimane disappear down the hall with a servant.

If only he knew how much it hurt to be on my feet. I licked my lips, determined to keep the pain off my face. I thought of retiring for the rest of the night, but I found myself shaking my head.

“Did you have something in mind?”

His grin was killing me. *It’s so cute*. I had to look away.

“I do. Come on.” I held out his arm, which I took, and we made our way to the kitchen. The “pumpkin spice” was so strong, I sneezed. A mixture of cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove filled the air. Though it was strong, I still loved it. It filled my entire body with warmth.

Dawson went into the kitchen and came out with a small plate of treats. The first, I noticed, were two large cinnamon rolls. They were still hot, with white icing melting off the edges.

“That looks really good,” I said, and he winked.

“I know just the perfect place to eat them.” We made our way outside, where the autumn air nipped at our noses. Though my feet continued to hurt from a combination of the cold, wearing boots, and falling off the horse earlier, I did my best to ignore them.

I drew my cloak tighter around me, but Dawson, being the gentleman, put his own cloak over my shoulders.

“Not to be rude,” he said, “But the cloaks back in your kingdom aren’t thick enough for this weather.”

“I agree,” I said, my shiver already ceasing after wearing his cloak for a few minutes. I couldn’t decide if it was his cloak that made me warm, or the fact it had been warmed by him first.

Stop, I told my thoughts.

We walked to a tree on a hillside, where we sat on a stone bench. I couldn’t help gaping at the gorgeous views which overlooked Alpenglow Kingdom. Smoke rose from the chimneys of the cottages in the village, and the sparkling colors of the autumn trees wove through the homes. The sea sat in the distance, glistening a dark blue, and the combination of colors filled my soul. The lake beside the castle was also a true blue color, with the fall-colored trees reflecting on the water.

“I know I’ve said it before…” My voice was soft. “But this is truly so beautiful.”

Dawson nodded. “I agree. Every year the views never cease to amaze me.” He held out the plate, and I took the cinnamon roll. Steam rolled off it, disappearing in the air.

My first bite filled my whole body with a cozy feeling that was hard to describe. The cinnamon combined with the sweet, buttery taste, and the roll that just melted in my mouth warmed me from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head.

“This is *so* good,” I said, looking up to find Dawson watching me. He smiled before taking a bite of his own.

It was kind of odd… I didn’t remember Dawson smiling this much. The last time we were together, both during the Pirate Wars and when we helped our siblings at Aquagleam Kingdom, he was very serious and somber. And he didn’t hesitate to scold or put his brother, Jax, in his place. But this version of Dawson, the one I saw now, seemed quite… laid back. Relaxed.

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

He gazed at the kingdom while answering. “I’ve spent a lot of time with my father. He’s getting old, and I’ll soon rule the kingdom. I visit Wolf and Mallory when I get the chance.” Prince Vance, whom Dawson called Wolf, was the middle brother, between Dawson and Jax. He had recently been found and we, royals at Sunrise Kingdom, celebrated when we heard the news. We thought he disappeared and died shortly after the Pirate Wars.

I studied Dawson.

Things have been good for him... Instead of licking his fingers, the prince wiped them on a handkerchief. I blushed that I’d licked mine earlier. He didn’t seem to mind though. The people of Sunrise Kingdom used their fingers to eat food often, instead of utensils.

But still. I was *not* doing a very good job of keeping up my “perfect” princess facade.

“If you don’t mind me saying,” I bit my lower lip before continuing. “You seem a lot more at ease than the last time we were together.”

“I am.” He sighed. “I feel a lot more peace now than I did before.” The air blew through, and multicolored leaves scattered around our feet. “The Pirate Wars are over. My brothers are safe. There is peace in the Incandescent Kingdoms.”

Dawson leaned on his knees and I couldn’t help noticing his broad, muscled back. Though he wore a white, long-sleeved shirt and a dark tunic, his toned physique was still apparent. I returned my attention to the cobblestone streets of the village and the people moving through. Beyond the village were golden fields, and I let myself stare at that. Anything but him.

“The last time we were together, I was dealing with…” He hesitated, then swallowed and continued. “I was dealing with a great deal of trauma from fighting in the wars.”

I couldn’t help my fingers from clenching the cloak, knowing full well what he meant. I still sometimes had my own nightmares, where I’d wake up in a panic, reliving moments from the past… moments when I was dressed as someone else, being somewhere a princess should not be, fighting in a war that I was not allowed to fight in…

“But now the wars are completely over and…” He sighed again. “I just don’t want to waste any more time or take things for granted. Life is so…” He searched for the word, looking up at the rustling leaves. “Life is beautiful, and so short.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, nodding.

“You’ve seen your own share of horrors from the war.” He glanced at me, his green eyes dark. “You were the most important nurse during all the wars. If it weren’t for you, we probably would’ve had more casualties.”

“It was a risk.” My eyes went to my suede boots, and I couldn’t help shuddering.

“Everything is a risk, isn’t it?” Dawson sat up, and now I had to look up to see his face. “We know that from the Pirate Wars,” he continued. “Obeying all the royal laws is a risk.” His green eyes poured into mine, and my heart started pounding. “And listening to your heart is a risk.”

Listening to your heart? The last time I listened to my heart, I almost died.

But I was there for him… This man, sitting before me, who I once had a girly crush on… I had saved his life. If I hadn’t taken a risk back then, he could be dead.

But risks were bad. And I would *never* do such a foolish thing in listening to my heart again.

“Filia,” Dawson cupped my chin, and every part of me panicked. It was like the moment from earlier replayed, where we fell off the horse, and Dawson was right there, as if he would kiss me.

Oh no.

Once upon a time I admired Dawson and would have ached for a kiss. But now we were both betrothed to other people. I’d made enough mistakes, took enough risks. My risks only brought further pain to me, and if anyone were to find out what I did, my reputation and life would be ruined.

I turned away in haste, my dark hair blowing across my face as I did so. I swiped my hair away, cleared my throat, and said, “Princess Yesenia is

going to make a fine queen for Alpenglow."

Dawson's entire countenance dropped, and he drew back a little. At first he didn't reply, and I was too afraid to look at his face, but when I did, he had turned his attention to the view, contemplating.

After an achingly long stretch of silence, he noticed a few treats left on the plate. "Have you tried pumpkin pie?" he asked.

He didn't even say anything about his betrothed.

I shook my head.

"Here. I snagged some for us." He held out the plate to me, and indeed, there were two mini pies on the plate, with a perfect dollop of whipped cream on top. The crust was adorably pinched, with orange filling within. Dawson took his own piece and held it out to me.

"Cheers to your first autumn season." His green eyes were bright. I relaxed a little as I tapped my pie against his.

Dawson knows I will not flirt with him. He knows his place, and it's with Princess Yesenia. Mine will be with Chief Tevita.

But Dawson continued. "Let's hope your first Fall Festival is a good one…" He winked. "A life-changing one."

My heart pattered like rain on a tin roof. *Oh no.* Did my rejection only push him to try harder? If so, I would certainly have to be on guard against any of his attempts to flirt or cross lines.

Yet as I thought about putting up a front, my heart ached deep down. *But what if I don't want to be on guard?*

CHAPTER 4

A nightmare pulled me from my sleep, and I woke up sweating. I panted as I hurried out of bed and rushed to open the window.

I need fresh air. Now.

This was not uncommon for me.

Stupid risks. I couldn't believe Dawson's words the previous day. What did he know of risks? I had risked everything to help in the Pirate Wars. My father said we, princesses, couldn't do anything—*anything*—to help.

So I took matters into my own hands. *Rash matters.*

I wiped my forehead and sat on the window sill, soaking in the chilly air. It felt *so* good. My eyes drifted towards the diary sitting on the side of my bed. Without thinking, I grabbed it and returned to the window sill to read my entries.

It was probably the worst thing to do… reading about and reliving a trauma could only worsen the trauma, right?

But somehow, reading what happened reminded me that it was all real, and I had to accept my choices, my "risks" during the Pirate Wars.

Day 1: I managed to successfully sneak onboard Crown Prince Dawson's ship dressed as a sailor. There are no sailors aboard from Sunrise Kingdom. Nobody recognizes me, and I'm going by the name of Gabriel. I'm terrified, but I know this is the right thing to do.

There were large gaps in my writing, mostly because I'd been too tired to write.

Day 31: Where has time gone? We've already been in two battles at sea. The sound of the cannons still rings in my ears. The swords clashing. There are so many wounded, and not enough medical help. The image of the men, wounded or dying, haunts me.

I shuddered and brought my knees to my chest.

Day 72: We were safely in the bay at Sunrise when we were attacked. A cannon blew up below deck, right where I was standing. Shrapnel and debris damaged my feet and the bottom half of my legs. I flew overboard from the impact. I saw Dawson go overboard too. I was terrified that he might be dead. Though my legs were wounded, I managed to swim to him and get us both to shore.

I closed my eyes, remembering how I dragged us both onto the sand. The moonlight poured on us, the pain shooting up my legs, and the sound of the cannons going off as the pirates destroyed Dawson's ship. He was unconscious, and all I could do was hold him and sob. My feet and legs were ruined, but all I could think about was him.

The entry continued in my hasty, chicken scratch handwriting: *He awoke, but I don't think he recognized me. I left him and barely made it to the palace.*

Then I lied to everyone. I lied about everything that had happened. I made an excuse that I'd been absent for almost three months because I'd been traveling around Sunrise Kingdom to see if any of our subjects needed help. People even believed me when I said that my foot got stuck in the reef, and that's what made me so sick with an infection and fever. The doctor who cared for me seemed to know my feet and leg injury weren't caused by the reef, but he was a good older friend of mine, and he didn't tell a soul.

So nobody knew about my feet, how small, deformed, and scrawny they looked. Nobody knew about my calves and shins, or the aching in my knees. My own sister, who I told that I dressed up as a man and fought in the wars, hadn't even seen my feet and legs.

And she, like everyone else, did not know that I saved Dawson. I could still remember how he felt as I held him, tears streaming down my face.

Nobody will ever, ever *know.* I had risked so much, and I would never do something like that again. Sure, I became a nurse after that whole thing. But I could've died during the Pirate Wars.

He could've died. My thoughts countered me, but I shook my head.

No more risks. No more listening to my heart. Because the last time I did, things could've gone badly for me. Very badly.

AUNTY TAIMANE WAITED outside my room for me, and when I opened the door, her judging eyes looked me up and down.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

I held Dawson's black cloak in my hand, meaning to return it to him that day.

"It's Dawson's—"

"*Prince* Dawson's," she corrected. I braced myself for her scoldings. The previous day Aunty Taimane and I hadn't had any time together, as Dawson showed me around the castle, and then I retired to bed. "That prince is crossing boundaries," she said. "He is betrothed, as are you, Filia."

I nodded. "Yes, Aunty Taimane, I know."

"Don't talk back to me."

Already I dreaded having her as my future mother-in-law, but I forced a smile. "I'm sorry, Aunty Taimane. I didn't mean to." I tried to stand taller, but only felt tiny under the woman's cold and stern expression. "I won't do anything dishonorable. Dawson—Prince Dawson and I are only friends."

She glared, but my words appeased her…

For the moment. I internally sighed and we walked to breakfast together. Sleep had been good for my aching legs and feet, and pins and needles no longer pricked them. But I knew that if I stood on my feet all day, they'd feel like they were bleeding by the end of the night.

I mentally prepared myself for such a thing.

When we entered the dining area, Dawson and his father stood. The look on Dawson's face said it all: he was happy to see me.

"Good morning Princess," he said, then nodded to Aunty Taimane, "And milady." But his attention returned to me almost immediately.

Did he not get the hint yesterday? My stomach twisted in all kinds of knots.

"Did you sleep alright?" He asked, pulling the chair for me to sit.

I nodded. "Yes."

Stop lying. I couldn't help it…. Or could I?

The king asked Aunty Taimane something, which gave Dawson a quick moment with me. "You look beautiful," he said, and a blush spread up my

cheeks. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I took a good long look at myself in the mirror that morning, wondering if I was pretty enough.

Pretty enough for who? I hadn't even met Tevita yet, so I had no idea what he thought of me. But maybe I was thinking about someone else… someone I *shouldn't* be thinking about…

Aunty Taimane's cutting remarks from the past echoed in my head: *Too skinny and short, hair isn't long enough and is too frizzy…*

I had pulled my dark hair back into a low bun, my usual hairstyle. I wore a simple dark blue cotton dress with long, fitted sleeves. The fabric was heavy enough to keep me warm and, like my other dresses, there was a large slit on the slide so I could ride a horse.

"Thank you," I said, my voice soft as I avoided eye contact.

Dawson smiled. "The first day of the Fall Festival is always the harvest. Everyone stops their usual work to help the farmers." His eyes sparkled as he looked down at me. "I think you'll enjoy it."

My stomach did all sorts of somersaults. *I want to,* I thought. How could I *not* enjoy it when I got to be with Dawson? I almost choked on my food, knowing I should not entertain such a thought.

I caught Aunty Taimane's eyes on me and felt myself shrinking.

Dawson and I are only friends. Right. I read my diary that morning, and I knew there were true dangers when it came to listening to one's heart.

THE AIR SMELLED of wheat and grains. Dew sat on the grass and glistened across the golden fields. As we made our way to the harvest, many families walked beside us, giving me the perfect opportunity to talk to anyone *but* Dawson.

His younger brother Vance, and Vance's wife, Mallory, also showed up. Mallory, with her rich red hair, was a delight to talk to. The royals wore plain clothing, which seemed fitting, but I couldn't help stealing a few extra glances at Dawson. He wore a plain white, long-sleeved shirt with brown pants and long boots.

I could still see him in his captain's uniform, and the flashback sent my head reeling.

Stay here. Stay present. I returned my attention to Mallory, who asked questions about Sunrise Kingdom.

"Do you have a harvest season?" she asked.

“Not really.” I thought about it. “Well, we don’t really have seasons in the islands. Some months in the year are rainier than others. And some months there are bigger waves but…” I shook my head. “We don’t have seasons, so the harvest is a continual round.”

Mallory played with her hair, which was made in a thick braid running down her back. “I’ve never been to Sunrise Kingdom,” she said. “I’ve never been to any of the Incandescent Kingdoms, except this one of course.” She bit her lower lip, her teal-blue eyes large and curious. “If you don’t mind me asking… I’ve heard that the people of Sunrise Kingdom don’t dance the way we do here. Is that true?”

Our island customs were unfamiliar to many of the other Incandescent Kingdoms. Some would even argue that our attire, especially the royals, was scandalous. Many of us royals would go around in sandals or barefoot. We ate with our fingers, and we wore special outfits to dance *hula* and other traditional dances handed down from our ancestors.

“I think we islanders dance in a way that is unfamiliar to others,” I said, nodding. “How do the people of Alpenglow dance?” It felt like someone was watching me so I glanced behind, finding Aunty Taimane staring at me again. When our eyes met, my insides tightened. Why was she always giving me an evil eye?

I’m not doing anything wrong, I thought, and instinctively looked for Dawson, finding him walking alongside his brother. Both of them carried a scythe over one shoulder.

See? I told myself. He was there. I was here, with Mallory. I had no reason to worry about Aunty Taimane eyeing me out.

Mallory interrupted my thoughts by sighing. “Oh, it is *so* fun. I can’t wait for the dancing tonight. There are dances that the royals do at their balls and such, but the dancing tonight is magical.”

“What makes it so magical?”

We approached a wagon, where Mallory put an empty backpack over her shoulders and grabbed a smaller scythe, then handed the same to me. I put the bag over my own shoulders and, with scythe in hand, continued to follow her.

“It’s mostly group dancing. There’s a *lot* of movement.” She looped her arm into mine. “And a lot of going in circles. It makes me dizzy.” She laughed. “But it’s fun because it’s kind of…” She glanced at her husband,

Vance, who must have noticed her look his way. He smiled and tipped his head to her.

That's so cute, I thought, watching as Mallory's eyes lit up.

"It's kind of romantic," she finished.

Oh no. I couldn't go to a dance if it was romantic. Especially when Dawson flirted without any shame.

I can't dance anyways, I thought, my feet already hurting from walking so far into the fields. Imagining dancing in dizzy circles and with multiple partners made my toes tingle.

"You spend almost the entire dance going around and around and when you finally get to be with your partner for part of the dance, it's so worth it." Mallory's smile was genuine, and my heart ached to know the feelings that she had.

Well, I could know those feelings if I danced tonight. But I didn't. I couldn't.

And especially not with him. As if knowing I was thinking about him, when I found Dawson standing amongst some farmers in the distance, he looked right at me and winked.

Oh great. I hurried to look away.

Mallory and I joined the women in gathering the wheat, and the whole time I kept my distance from Dawson. I knew it wouldn't be possible to do that the entire Fall Festival. The king instructed Dawson to be my escort anyway.

Yet as we worked, I couldn't help stealing glances at him. He laughed with his people, jumped in to help those who seemed tired, and overall worked hard. Even though the air was quite chilly, he and the other men worked up a sweat. His shirt clung to his back by midday, and when Mallory and I went to the wagon to hand out water, I couldn't help noticing the outline of his back muscles.

Mallory must have noticed me gawking because she nudged and gave me a look.

A blush spread up my cheeks but she spared me any embarrassment by asking more questions about Sunrise Kingdom. Gratitude welled up in me that at least I had a friend here, and she knew I had to stay loyal to my royal obligations.

But as the sun set and we all made our way home to clean and prepare for the dance that evening, my heart ached. I couldn't stop thinking about

the way Dawson worked that day. I didn't get to talk to him—which was a good thing—because Vance and Mallory also came to the castle, and Mallory stayed by my side. And once we were inside, Aunty Taimane and I walked to our rooms. She reminded me that a princess of Sunrise Kingdom didn't dance inappropriately, and I should be careful that evening.

My feet and legs ached from the long day of standing and working but it wasn't dancing on the soreness that I dreaded… it was Aunty Taimane.

Much to my relief, however, she retired for the night. This meant two things:

First, I wasn't going to be watched that night at the dance.

But second, if Aunty Taimane wasn't there to judge my every move, *I* needed to judge my every move. Because I still couldn't trust Dawson and his flirtatious actions.

Not for one second…

CHAPTER 5

I heard the music wafting in the window before the dance that evening: Violins, fiddles, mandolins, and singing. It was so different from the drums and chanting of the islanders at Sunrise Kingdom. The dance was taking place not far from the castle and I could see the stringed lights surrounding a large grassy area from my window.

I had some time to spare before the dance and craved being alone. As a princess, I was constantly surrounded by people. Social life was the norm, which forced me to seek out alone time. My body and heart needed rejuvenation from always serving and listening to others. It wasn't a bad thing, but after years of it, I rather enjoyed quiet moments by myself.

I wore a dark green dress, with long sleeves, and a woven ta'ovala around my waist. As I put on my suede boots, deep down I wished I could wear sandals. I missed wearing sandals, or even going around barefoot anymore.

Of course, I couldn't do that here in Alpenglow Kingdom. It wasn't appropriate, and the cold weather would make it unbearable. So I nodded at my boots and made my way out of my room.

My feet and legs felt like lead, a hundred pounds weighing on them that I couldn't endure, but I wanted to find a nice place to sit and be alone. Walking through the castle, the stone walls seemed so… cold. Back at Sunrise Kingdom, we lived in a palace surrounded by cascading waterfalls.

It was beautiful and the island breeze made it impossible to ever feel uncomfortably humid or hot.

But as I passed the large paned windows of the castle, I couldn't help admiring the autumn landscape. The trees were like multicolored flames along the hillsides. The sunset glowed on the mountains, and I turned, giving it my full attention.

The alpenglow. I heard of the golden light pouring on the land at this time of day. It truly took my breath away. The alpenglow on the mountains, combined with the harvest gold and pumpkin orange colors, fed my soul. How could someone *not* fall in love with this?

After making a mental memory of the image, something I would keep with me forever, especially since I would never see anything like this again, I continued to the library. Finding it empty, I sat on the settee in front of the fireplace, turning my body so I faced the large window, while my back faced the door.

Pulling out my diary, I wrote of my experiences that day: the harvest, speaking with Mallory, the joy I felt from the gorgeous views…

Then I couldn't help mentioning the soreness of my feet and legs, ending with: *I hope I'll be able to endure the dance tonight. I'm a princess though… I'll have to.*

I placed the diary on my lap and stared out the window. Golden tones painted the sunset sky. Checking behind me, to make sure nobody had entered the library, I returned my attention to my diary and went back a few pages… I couldn't help it. After seeing Dawson working that day, some old feelings had returned. I flipped to some old diary entries:

Day 25: I couldn't help noticing Captain Dawson today. He is so genuine. Though he's very serious and somber in nature, he cares about his men. I've been able to keep aloof from him, and he's busy enough, but when I do see him interacting with the sailors, he truly cares about each of them. He makes an effort to get to know them, their stories, and more.

That was when I really started watching him.

Day 38: If I could choose the man I married, I would want him to be someone just like Captain Dawson.

Day 49: We just got through another battle and to say it's a miracle I'm alive is an understatement. A few pirates gained up on me, and Captain Dawson ran to my aid. I don't think he recognized me. But I felt something more in me than just gratitude. I think I'm falling for him.

Day 60: I saw Dawson laugh today. I don't know what he was laughing at, but it was the sweetest thing to watch. His smile lights up the world around him.

"Hey princess, what are you up to?"

I slammed the diary shut, heat filling my cheeks as I sat up and turned to find Dawson entering the library. He was far enough that he didn't see the writing in my diary, but I still felt like I'd been intruded on. If he read my thoughts, it would be so embarrassing.

"Oh, nothing." I slipped my diary into a hidden pocket in my ta'ovala. I readjusted myself to sit more appropriately and upright, hurrying to slip my feet back into my suede boots. Though I wore socks, my feet were abnormally small, and I didn't want him to notice.

Dawson smiled and motioned to the seat next to me. I nodded, and he sat. "Was that a journal?"

"Maybe." I licked my lips and stared at the fire to compose myself.

Dawson didn't see anything. And he never would. I decided that the night before my marriage to Tevita, I would burn the diary. Nobody would ever, *ever* know about my participation in the Pirate Wars or my old secret crush on Dawson.

Old crush, I told myself again and again. Because I was over those feelings. Totally.

"Did you enjoy the harvest today?" he asked, leaning forward on his knees and staring into the fireplace. He was close, so close that our arms touched. The settee seemed big earlier but with him on it, it felt tiny to fit two people.

"I did. And you?"

He stretched, and I had to look away. *I'm not attracted to him*, I repeated over and over in my mind. One day, very soon, I would be back at Sunrise Kingdom, marrying Tevita. Aunty Taimane would become my mother-in-law. Tevita and I would move to his village…

"I enjoyed it a lot," Dawson answered. "I always do. It's tiring, but it feels good to work, you know?"

I nodded.

He nudged me and the contact made my stomach flutter. "Can I ask what you wrote in your journal?"

"It's a diary," I corrected.

"Oh." He winked. "Did you write about me?"

I wished the earth would open and swallow me because my blush said it all. I hadn't exactly written about Dawson, but I'd certainly read old entries about him.

The smile on Dawson's face was full of something I could only describe as joy. Why, though? We were never going to be together so…

He gently touched my chin, turning my face towards him.

Oh no… Why were we sitting this close? And why wasn't I pulling away? I stared into his green eyes, a war raging within me. My old feelings for him were strong as ever.

I always wanted to marry someone like Dawson… why can't I marry Dawson?

I'm betrothed to Tevita…

"Filia," Dawson's low voice was soft, full of longing. "I think I've been in love with you for as long as I can remember."

My eyes widened.

No. This can't be happening.

But it is!

Elation and horror filled me. Dawson loved me? *Me?!*

"You're the kindest person I've ever met. You always put other people before yourself." He studied my face, his hand now moving up my jawline, to my ear and neck. I should've pulled away, but I was frozen in place. "I just can't imagine seeing myself with anyone but you."

"Dawson—"

His eyes rested on my lips, and he leaned in. A million thoughts flashed through my mind:

I'm betrothed.

He's betrothed.

What are we doing?!

I can't do this. My people look up to me. I'm supposed to be the perfect princess!

His lips barely touched mine, his pine and forest smell intoxicating my senses, and I pulled away.

"Dawson," I said with as much firmness as I could muster. "No, we can't…"

An awkwardness stretched between us as Dawson studied me again. For a moment his eyebrows creased, then the corner of his lip turned up.

Before he could speak, I swallowed, a lump forming in my throat, and said, “We’re both betrothed to other people. We have royal obligations.” I hardened my expression and looked him straight in the eyes. “Dawson, you are my escort throughout the festivities, but I will *not* tolerate this behavior.”

“What behavior?” His eyes sparkled and my insides fumed with both attraction and anger.

“Flirting. You will *not* flirt with me,” I said, scooting away. “Nor will you ever attempt to kiss me again, understand? This is inappropriate, and is completely disrespectful to those we are marrying.”

“I don’t care about our royal obligations.” He took my hand, which I yanked away.

“Dawson—”

“I just want to be with you.”

“We’ll *never* be together,” I told him. “We’ve both grown up knowing we will one day marry for political purposes. It’s cruel to make this hard on both of us.”

He smiled and I wished I could take my words back. “So it is hard for you?”

“No—”

“Do you feel something?”

“No.” At this, I stood. “Dawson—Prince Dawson, you will treat me only as a friend, understand?”

He stood too, and I had to look up at him. Nervousness swirled in my stomach at how handsome he was.

Ugh, I’m horrible at this. So maybe he was handsome, but it was no excuse to be unfaithful to my betrothed. I had to be a good princess.

Dawson bowed. “Very well, Filia. If that is what you wish.” He smiled, his expression telling a different story. Offering his arm, he motioned to the door. “We should probably get to the dance, milady.” He was definitely acting weird now. I thought my rejection would sting him, make him back off, but when I looked up at him, he smiled coolly, calmly.

My rejection must have done the exact opposite. If he was so set on us being together, I would have to *truly* be on guard.

I must uphold my image, I thought. Because if anyone were to ever find out who I really was, what I really felt, they would see I wasn’t the perfect princess… *at all.*

CHAPTER 6

We walked to the dance in silence, and when I glanced at Dawson, he seemed totally at peace. Meanwhile, a flood of emotions washed over me.

He likes me—no. He loves me!

I can't have him. I'll never have him.

My royal obligations are the most important thing.

But we've been through so much together.

Right, that he doesn't know about. And will never know about…

Mallory came running to me, hugging me, and pulling me into the dance. Dawson didn't attempt to follow but, instead, conversed with one of the nobles. His father, the king, participated in every dance. As I whirled around in circles, linking arms, switching partners, and clapping my hands, the pressure from the moment in the library began to ease.

I'm going to be alright, I told myself over and over. *I'll marry Tevita and things will be fine.* I congratulated myself on putting Dawson in his place. He knew better than to try and kiss me.

He tried to kiss me. That thought, alone, brought back all the feelings. I pushed them down, recommitting to myself as a princess of Sunrise Kingdom, with an image to uphold.

Just as I told myself I was perfectly happy without Dawson in my life, I saw him with another girl. She held his arm in a pouty, childish way, a frown on her face as she waited for him to speak with one of the farmers.

Princess Yesenia. She was beautiful. With long, flowy dark hair, dark eyes, full lips, and high-arched eyebrows, she looked every bit a princess—every bit an intimidating princess at that. People around her curtsied or bowed and she eyed them with disdain, as if they were completely below her.

She wore a dark blue lace dress that fit her perfectly. The golden crown on her head only made her look more royal and official.

I never wore my crown. Most of us royals at Sunrise Kingdom didn't wear our crowns unless there was a special ceremony that called for it. In fact, we didn't have "crowns," at least not the metal and gold kind. We wore *hei*, a traditional headdress that varied in name and style for different occasions.

We didn't wear it on our travels, especially not something like this. But now I just felt… empty. Alone. As I looked around at the people dancing and smiling, loneliness filled me.

I don't belong here…

As if to respond to my thoughts, Mallory pulled me out of the circle. "I'm so dizzy," she said, and my own circling thoughts, combined with the pain in my legs, made me realize I was quite dizzy too.

"Oh is that—" She noticed the princess on Dawson's arm. "Dawson!"

What was Mallory doing? I was trying to *avoid* him. He just finished speaking with the farmer and turned as we approached. Princess Yesenia and I kissed one another's cheeks, a custom familiar in both of our cultures. She and Mallory curtsied to one another.

After curtsying, Princess Yesenia returned her hand to Dawson's arm. He didn't seem to mind, which filled me with…

I lifted my chin, telling myself this was right. This was all how it was supposed to go.

"It's good to see you," Princess Yesenia said, her voice cold and distant. Her dark eyes, almost the color of night, pierced into me. "How have you been, Princess Filia?"

"Well, thank you." I offered a smile. "And you?"

"I've been better." Her eyebrows creased once more, and Dawson looked down at her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I think I'll retire for the night," she said. "It's been a long day of traveling and my head doesn't feel well."

“I can escort you,” he offered. He was being the perfect gentleman, and the way he looked at Yesenia was friendly, but… just that.

Or perhaps I wanted to imagine it that way.

“No, you’re needed here.” She curtsied to all of us and excused herself. I couldn’t help watching her walk away, taking her guard’s arm for support. Did she know how lucky she was?

“We were just taking a break,” Mallory said, then jumped as Vance came from behind, wrapping his arms around her waist. She snuggled into him and I had to look away. Jealousy panged my chest. I didn’t want to admit it, but it was clear as day.

I want a relationship like that. I caught Dawson watching me and the corner of his lip turned up.

“I haven’t danced tonight yet,” he said, offering his hand. “Care to join me?”

I should’ve said no. It wasn’t fair or right to Yesenia that I danced with her husband-to-be. But the jealousy inside of me raged. I wasn’t one to cater to such petty feelings, but desperation got to me—the desperation to be wanted, loved, appreciated… It was also a desperation for someone to see me for who I really was, not just a perfect princess who lived by the rules.

Because right now I certainly did *not* want to follow the rules. I wanted to be with Dawson, wanted him to wrap his arms around my waist, wanted to be the princess at his side.

And that’s so wrong. As we danced the night away, my feet and legs feeling like they would bleed, I remembered what Mallory said: *You spend almost the entire dance going around and around and when you finally get to be with your partner for part of the dance, it’s so worth it.*

As we spun round and round with different partners, I kept searching for Dawson. When would we get to be together?

By the end of the dance, when we nearly collided into each other, out of breath, one of his hands on my hip, the other holding my hand, I wanted to stay there forever. I wanted to look up into his green eyes and love him for the rest of my life.

But as soon as I thought that, the smile on my face disappeared.

We’ll never be together.

I quickly excused myself, and Dawson made to follow, but the king called for his son.

I must stay loyal to my royal obligations. I told myself the mantra over and over, collapsing on my bed and throwing off my boots and socks to reveal my deformed feet.

It was just a reminder of the one time I listened to my heart. I almost died. I almost made a huge mockery of the crown of Sunrise Kingdom. I almost lost my status as a princess.

No matter what happens, I told myself, thinking of Dawson, Yesenia, and the others I interacted with that day. *I'm going to fulfill every expectation and obligation of being a princess.* It was the only way to survive.

CHAPTER 7

A knock on the door had me bolt upright in bed.

"Filia? Are you ready?" Aunty Taimane's voice came through. Light poured in from the window. What time was it?

"You missed breakfast—are you in there?" The door handle shook and I drew my covers over me, slightly offended that she would attempt to walk in on me.

"I'm up," I called out. "Give me a minute please."

"We don't have a minute. We were supposed to be at that patch five minutes ago." The doorknob shook again. "Are you ready?"

Patch? What patch?

The pumpkin patch. Right! Today we were going to pick pumpkins and meet the families of the kingdom. The patch was, as Dawson told me, the best part for the children. The royal family always made an effort to be there and interact with their citizens for fun.

"Hang on please—"

"Were you out late?" Her tone was disapproving and my insides tightened. I wasn't out *that* late. After I collapsed in bed, I got up eventually and washed for the night. Memories from the previous night made my head hurt, but I resolved to keep my commitment.

Dawson is completely off-limits, as am I.

When I stepped out of bed, pins and needles shot up my feet. I winced but hurried to the washroom, splashing my face with water and braiding my

hair.

“I met Princess Yesenia this morning.”

Was Aunty Taimane determined to talk through the door to me? Why couldn’t she just wait until I was ready?

“Mmhm.” I checked myself in the mirror, staring at my brown skin and dark hair.

Princess Yesenia is so pretty…

“She was perfectly proper.”

And, so? I rolled my eyes, something I didn’t dare to do in front of Aunty Taimane.

“I’m glad she’s here.”

Of course, Aunty Taimane was glad Yesenia was here. The interactions between Dawson and me certainly didn’t go unnoticed.

I opened the door and Aunty Taimane looked me up and down. She smelled strongly of incense… Or smoke… or *something.* I couldn’t pinpoint it, but it had a strange smell. I waited for her approval and when she nodded, we walked together to the carriage waiting for us outside the castle.

“This festival seems to drag out,” she muttered as we stepped inside.

“I think it’s quite fun,” I said.

She looked out the window, a scowl on her face.

“What are we waiting for?” I asked, embarrassed that I’d made us late.

The carriage door opened and Yesenia stood there, Dawson behind her. I forced a smile to keep the heat from rushing up my cheeks. Just thinking about being so close to Dawson last night… and then seeing him now…

Why is he like this?

“Good morning,” I said.

Yesenia kissed mine and Aunty Taimane’s cheeks, then sat across from my future mother-in-law. Dawson sat across from me.

Just great.

“Good morning,” he said to all of us, a smile on his face. His green eyes pierced into me, still shining like they did yesterday when I told him *not* to flirt with or try to kiss me.

“I thought we were late,” I said quietly to Aunty Taimane as one of the guards said something to Dawson. She gave me a look.

“We’re on time now, aren’t we?”

I wanted to roll my eyes but, instead, pursed my lips and looked out the window. Why did Dawson have to sit across from me? *Why?*

If only I'd taken my sweet, sweet time that morning, Dawson and Yesenia would've taken their own carriage. Aunty Taimane tricked me so I could get ready faster.

So annoying. I thought she was trying to keep me away from Dawson.

Or maybe she just wants me to see Dawson and Yesenia together. I reached my hand into my pocket to feel the locket from my sisters. It soothed my irritation.

Everything is fine, I told myself.

We rode in a content silence for a while and I stared out the window, watching the colorful trees pass by. We finally rounded a corner into a spacious field full of orange, round pumpkins. The orange color of the pumpkins against the green and brown ground was so cheerful.

So cute, I thought. Families had already shown up, many of the children running around and picking pumpkins.

"Don't worry," Dawson said to me. "We're not harvesting pumpkins. But you'll pick a few to help make pies for the community dinner tonight."

"We have to touch the pumpkins?" Yesenia asked as the carriage door opened. She looked disgusted.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Dawson said, shrugging. He went out first then helped her, Aunty Taimane, then myself out. When our fingers touched, he looked up at me, his eyes intent.

"Thank you." I quickly pulled my hand away as soon as my feet touched the ground. Nothing quite prepared me for how exhausted my feet would feel after the harvest and dance the previous day, but I would pretend to be fine.

I looked around for a place to sit, but Dawson led the princess, my aunt, and me to a group of families.

Before I knew it, we were socializing. The children pulled my hands to play with them, and I was whisked away into potato sack races, apple bobbing, and sliding down giant slides. The children thought it was their duty to show me, the island princess, every activity at the patch.

As we sat in a box of corn kernels, Dawson and Yesenia appeared. She made a face while Dawson jumped in. The children screamed and laughed.

"What are you all playing?" the prince asked.

“We were just showing her around,” said one of the boys, the oldest of the children who took it upon themselves to make sure I experienced everything.

“Did you know Princess Filia can spar?” Dawson motioned to a group of kids with small play wood swords.

I shook my head. “I don’t—”

“When we were at Aquagleam Kingdom, Filia fought off pirates.”

“You did?” Yesenia folded her arms, looking rather annoyed.

Dawson nodded. “And she was good at it. She’s also a nurse.”

The kids looked from Dawson to me. “I thought she was a princess,” said one of the girls.

“I am a princess.” I stood, emptying corn kernels from my pockets. Whatever game Dawson was playing was *not* funny.

“Do princesses play tag?” asked the girl.

“Not usually—”

One of the boys tagged Dawson. “You’re it!” He sprinted off and the kids went running in all directions, leaving me there, in the pit. Dawson tapped another child, who then rushed to me. He tapped my arm.

“You’re it, Princess Filia!”

Before I could respond, he ran off.

No, no, no… This was so un-princess-like.

But what choice do I have? I went after the closest little girl, my feet hurting from the effort. She laughed and screamed, running straight towards Yesenia and tapping her dress.

The princess looked positively spooked as she raised her palms. “Get away from me!”

The girl exclaimed, “You’re it!” and ran off.

Yesenia’s face darkened as she watched the kids running in all directions. For a moment, I thought she was going to blow up at them, but there was something… off. She rubbed her forehead, her eyebrows creased.

“Make it stop!” she exclaimed, squeezing her eyes shut.

Is she alright?

“Quiet down—go run off in the field,” I told the children, instructing the oldest boy to be “it” in Yesenia’s place.

I approached her slowly. “Are you alright, Yesenia?”

“Ugh.” She shook her head, still rubbing her temples. “Those dumb kids. Why do they have to scream so loud?”

“Is everything alright?” Dawson ran up to us at that point.

“Is your head hurting?” I asked, already thinking of remedies I could make to help the princess.

“It’s pounding. I was doing fine until they…” Her voice trailed off and she motioned to her guard. He hurried to her side. “I must excuse myself.”

“Let me help you,” I said, offering my arm. Much to my surprise, she took it, giving me a chance to study her. She looked awfully pale and kept closing her eyes. It was an overcast day but she continued to squeeze them shut. Her betrothed offered his arm, and she motioned with her hand, as if shooing him away.

“If you’d stop being such a child, Dawson, they wouldn’t have screamed like that.”

“Sorry, Yesenia.” He did seem very sorry, but she glared at him.

“Are you? Stop acting like a child, Dawson.”

He blushed. “I’m truly sorry—”

She shook her head. “I was doing fine, but I will probably retire for the rest of the day.”

The rest of the day?

Dawson and I exchanged worried glances and he looked like he wanted to come with us, but I held up my palm to stop him. Maybe it was better if he gave his betrothed some distance.

As Yesenia and I walked, her fingers started trembling. “Where’s the carriage?” she asked, her voice now sounding higher pitched, almost like she was panicking.

Aunty Taimane noticed us and began to approach but I shook my head, and she stopped. I knew she would ask me later what was going on, but I could tell Yesenia didn’t want to draw attention to herself. Her hands began to sweat.

“Do you have a headache coming on?” I asked softly.

She nodded. “You’re the nurse princess, aren’t you? You would know.” I did know. I’d seen things like this happen before.

“Let’s get you to the castle. I don’t have all of my remedies on hand, but I do have a few things in my room that might help you.”

“There’s nothing that helps these headaches.” Now she sounded angry. “I just have to wait it out. If only those kids didn’t scream.”

My heart hurt for Yesenia. She always seemed so… distant and mean. But was this the reason why? Were her headaches the cause of her

avoidance of people?

“I’m sorry Yesenia.”

“Save your breath.” Already she began to convulse, her body shaking involuntarily. Her guard helped her into the carriage, treating her with great care. I stepped in, grateful to sit and have a break off my feet. Before I could offer to help, Yesenia’s guard stepped in, knowing exactly what to do. He brought out a dark black mask and handed it to her. But when her hands trembled too much, he gently placed it over her eyes, tying the back.

“Thank you,” she murmured, feeling the seat.

“You can lie here, milady.” He helped her rest on her side and she curled up into a ball. It was so… un-princess-like.

“Are you still there, Filia?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Please don’t tell anyone about this.”

“I won’t.”

She let out soft moans as the carriage pulled away. I looked out to see Dawson watching us, and he shrugged at me, as if asking if he could do anything. I shook my head yet again and he truly looked sorry.

The princess’s body continued to shake. I moved to the opposite side and placed my hand on her shoulder, wishing I could help her.

But she was experiencing some sort of intense headache, accompanied by light sensitivity and seizure-like symptoms. I’d seen things like this before, and it hurt to watch. I hated being so helpless when people had to suffer from things like this.

When we reached the castle, I ran to my room and grabbed remedies, then hurried to help Princess Yesenia. Pins shot up my legs but all I could think about was wanting to be of help.

As I entered the room, Yesenia’s servant left, saying she needed to grab some water for the princess. With the curtains drawn, the room remained dark. Yesenia’s guard stayed with her, kneeling next to the bed as she squeezed his hand. It didn’t seem like the most appropriate thing, especially because he was quite young to be her guard. Something like this would look scandalous, but he seemed sweet and attentive to her needs.

My nurse instincts came into full gear as I tended to the princess, massaging the back of her neck and parts of her shoulders, then rubbing scented oils on her temples. After a few hours, she finally relaxed and fell asleep.

I was exhausted and longed for a nap myself.

“Thank you, princess,” said the guard. “I can watch her from here.”

I nodded and left, meaning to return to my room. But my feet ached, and I realized I didn’t eat or drink anything that morning.

“Filia?” Dawson came running down the castle hall. It was just us. Alone. But I didn’t feel well, and my whole body went weak.

Oh no… I’d never fainted before in my life. I saw it happen a lot during the Pirate Wars but never experienced it myself.

“Dawson…” I reached out my hand, knowing that he would catch me. Indeed, he did, scooping me into his arms as everything went dark.

CHAPTER 8

"You're one of the kindest people I know."

I blinked awake, looking straight into Dawson's green eyes. I was lying on something… a bed. But not my bed.

"Give her some space, your highness."

Dawson backed away while I slowly sat up, everything blurry for a moment. The first thing I noticed was that a blanket covered my body… and I was fully dressed, except for my boots.

Panic overwhelmed me as I curled my feet under my body to kneel. Did they see my feet? Looking around, we were in a doctor's room. This had to still be part of the castle because the walls were stone and the doctor looked like he had worked here, for the royal family, for years.

Dawson and Aunty Taimane were in the room, and she looked absolutely cross.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"Princess Yesenia wasn't feeling well, so I used some of my remedies to help her."

"It must have worked because Yesenia was in the great hall an hour ago," Dawson said.

"An hour ago?" I rubbed my head, glancing out the window. Sunset painted the sky in warm colors. My stomach ached, and my head pounded.

The doctor handed me water, which I quickly drank.

“Filia is not accustomed to this weather,” Aunty Taimane said to the prince. “You shouldn’t have her out as much as you have. The weather, plus the fact that she didn’t eat this morning, made her fatigued.”

“Oh, I’m fine—” I started to say, but she interrupted.

“You’re *not* fine. You fainted and could’ve hit your head on the stone floor. Did you want that?”

I shook my head, feeling like a child receiving a scolding.

“Well, I did catch her.” Dawson shrugged, and before Aunty Taimane could say something, he pulled a tray of food from a nearby table. “You better eat, Filia.”

All I could think about was my feet. I stole a glance at the doctor, but he seemed unbothered.

“Did I just faint from lack of food and water?” I asked him before taking a bite of warm soup.

He nodded. “That’s what I suspected. But your feet—”

“My feet are fine.” I cut him off before he had a chance to say anything. The words came out loud and fast. “I mean. I’m fine, thank you for tending to me.”

He bowed. “Of course, your highness. My pleasure.” He excused himself, and Aunty Taimane stepped forward.

“You are excused, Prince Dawson.”

“Aunty—”

She gave me the eye, and I bit my lower lip. Dawson looked from Aunty Taimane to me, and his eyebrows creased. But he bowed.

“Please don’t hesitate to let me know if you need anything tonight, princess,” he said. There were no festivities this night, much to my relief. I was exhausted, and even eating food seemed to require too much energy.

Dawson excused himself, leaving Aunty Taimane and me in the room. She folded her arms, and I stuffed my mouth, hoping to avoid any kind of conversation with her.

“What happened to your feet?” she asked.

My hands got sweaty and I kept chewing, hoping to avoid the conversation. When I swallowed, I reached for a roll, but Aunty Taimane yanked the tray away. Alarmed, I gaped at her. What had gotten into her? I knew she was strict and cold, but now she just seemed… mean.

“Nothing.”

“They’re deformed. I know what cuts and scrapes from the reefs look like, and that’s not it.” She slammed the tray on the table nearby and approached, her eyes dark. “What happened to your feet, Filia?”

What was this all about? “Nothing—”

“Don’t lie to me. I will not have some disease-ridden girl marry my son—”

“I’m not diseased!”

“Then what is it?” She grasped the blanket and pulled it off, but my feet were safely tucked under me. She wouldn’t see a thing. “Stand up this instant—”

“I am a princess of Sunrise Kingdom, you will not speak to me this way.” I hated raising my voice. It made me feel ugly, but something about Aunty Taimane seemed to bring out this bad attitude, this mean person in me.

She stood taller. “And you are betrothed to my son.” Her fingers curled into fists. “Whatever you are hiding, I *will* find out, Filia. I will not let my son marry a liar!”

I opened my mouth to say I wasn’t a liar, but stopped myself. I had lied *many* times about this situation. Aunty Taimane smoothed her hair and pursed her lips. “You can try to hide it, but you know as well as I that air can never be forced to stay underwater. It will *always* rise to the top.” With that, she stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

For a moment I sat there, fingers trembling, a lump in my throat. What if Aunty Taimane did find out I dressed as a soldier and fought in the Pirate Wars?

Air can never be forced to stay underwater. I was a swimmer, an island girl who went to the beach almost every day of my life. Just thinking about bubbles rising made me shudder because she was right. Could I hide the truth forever?

Nobody will find out. A wave of panic came over me, as I thought about my diary in my bedroom. I rushed out of the doctor’s office and ran a different way to my room. When I reached it, the diary was still safely sitting on the nightstand. Why did I leave it out so irresponsibly?

After placing it in my pocket, a cold sweat came over me.

Fresh air. I need fresh air. Memories resurfaced, ones where I thought I’d get caught, where I was sure someone would discover my identity as a soldier in disguise. It made my hands clammy.

Guilt. I always felt guilty, even when I was trying to do the right thing. And now, Aunty Taimane made me feel guilty… for hiding the truth, for not owning who I truly was, or what I did.

I practically ran to the stable, though it was more of a hobble, and took one of the horses for a ride. As the fresh, evening autumn air blew around me, my thoughts calmed.

Nobody will know. I patted the diary in my pocket. Instead of waiting until the night before my marriage to Tevita, I would toss the diary into the sea on my return to Sunrise Kingdom.

My eye caught hold of a campfire nearby, a family sitting around it. They had big smiles on their faces and the father played the guitar. I smelled a whiff of the campfire smoke.

Why not burn it now? I asked myself. I could toss this diary away, and nobody—except Heilani and I—would ever know.

But there was something, deep inside of me, that, possibly, *wanted* someone to know. What would it feel like to let this knowledge out to the world? Would it set me free?

No. It would only spoil my reputation, make the royal family of Sunrise Kingdom look bad, and definitely disgust Aunty Taimane. My symbolic marriage might be canceled.

That's not so bad, is it? I squeezed my eyes shut and reached my hand into my pocket, finding the locket from my sisters.

I can't do this to them. I couldn't let them down, so I would toss the diary into the sea. This trip, this Fall Festival, would be my last taste of freedom. I'd allow myself to record all my thoughts and feelings, including any feelings about *him.* And then I'd throw away my past and let it drown in the blue sea.

AS I WANDERED around the forests surrounding the castle, I noticed various plants I'd studied in the past, but never had a chance to see. Sunrise Kingdom had tropical plants, and my brain stored every bit of information about each of the plants' uses and more.

But in my spare time, I read books about plants from other kingdoms. And now that I was here, in Alpenglow, I couldn't help stopping to get a closer look at the plants around me. My nursing self and curiosity kicked in. I dismounted the horse and stopped to examine some ferns.

The fallen leaves crunched beneath my boots as I admired the feathery touch of the fern. I couldn't recall the name of this fern, but I remembered that mashing it could help ease aches.

I could use this, I thought, pins and needles plaguing my feet again.

A cold breeze blew my hair into my face and I pushed it back, looking up at the multicolored canopy. Was it bad I would miss this?

Autumn is so beautiful.

The sound of an approaching rider distracted me, and both irritation and elation filled me.

"Are you alright, princess? It's getting late and your aunt said you disappeared somewhere." Prince Dawson dismounted his horse and motioned to the ferns. "Studying the plants?"

"I just went for a ride but…" I stroked the fern. "I got a little distracted."

"Did you like helping out with plants and natural remedies?" Dawson asked, motioning for us to make our way back to the castle. It was getting dark, after all.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you like being a nurse in the Pirate Wars?"

"It was scary at first." I shrugged. "But I've seen worse."

"You have?" He looked at me, suspicious.

"Well… war is ugly all around." I concluded that discussion about my time as a nurse. It had been terrifying and *very* ugly. Watching people in their most vulnerable, weakest state was not something I wanted to remember. It had hardened me in many ways, but also softened me. I became more empathetic and compassionate toward others. I made an effort to comfort, instead of judging. And when the wounded didn't make it, I had to pray for the strength to keep going.

An owl hooted nearby and Dawson glanced up at the sky. "There's the harvest moon. Isn't it beautiful?"

It was beautiful. The moon shone white, yet there seemed to be a golden glow around it.

"Every time I see things like the moon or stars, it reminds me of being a captain during the wars." Did Dawson think about the wars often? It seemed to be the only thing he spoke of to me. Has it always been this way?

Maybe he doesn't know what else to talk about…

“It was so hard to sleep,” he continued. “I would lie awake every night, just praying and hoping that we wouldn’t lose any more men, that there would be no more casualties.”

It was weird to think that I did the same thing… and we were on the same ship. We were so close, yet so far. Even now, as we walked side by side, Dawson was physically close. Yet he felt so far…

Because we’re both betrothed to other people.

“It’s hard for me to connect with Yesenia,” Dawson said, and I couldn’t help but look at him. What was he talking about? “She hasn’t experienced war. Her kingdom has had peace, and they hardly sent men to help in the Pirate Wars. She didn’t lose a brother, father, cousin, uncle, friend… she didn’t see the horror of war.” He sighed, rubbing the back of his head. “Don’t get me wrong. She’s nice when she wants to be but… we have so little in common.”

“You don’t have to have anything in common to fall in love,” I said.

Dawson shrugged. “No, I guess not. But it helps.”

Before he could say something about *us,* which I assumed he might try, I cleared my throat. “I think Yesenia has some sort of a condition, an ailment. I can’t say for certain, but we don’t know what she’s gone through.” I licked my lips. “Perhaps she didn’t go to war, but that doesn't mean her challenges are any less difficult or scary. We don’t know what things are really like for her.”

We walked in silence for a long time, and the quiet made my attention return to the throbbing in my feet and legs.

“You truly are the kindest person I know,” Dawson finally said.

Oh no. I wasn’t trying to get him to admire me!

I sighed and he smiled. Why was he making this so, *so* difficult? “Yesenia has her strengths,” I said. “You’ll find them, and that will help you see her for who she is.”

“Unless her guard already sees her for who she is,” Dawson muttered. So Yesenia’s overly protective guard hadn’t gone unnoticed by Dawson either.

I bit my lower lip. “He’s just her guard.”

“Looks like more to me.”

“Every princess has a personal guard.”

“You don’t.”

I glared, quickly losing my point. “Because I don’t need one. I can fend for myself.”

“I know.” Dawson was smiling again. We reached the stable and as we handed our horses to the stable boy, I gave Dawson a look.

“I don’t need a guard, Dawson.”

“I’ve seen you fight before. I know.” He offered his arm and we walked to the castle together. “If there’s anyone who should be on guard around you, it’s me.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but anything would’ve come out in a flirty way. As we stopped outside my bedroom door, Dawson bowed.

“It was a pleasure to be with you today, Filia.”

I wanted to say the same but, instead, curtsied and said, “Thank you for escorting me this evening. Good night Prince Dawson.”

He looked down at me, that same old smile on his face. He didn’t believe my facade—the one hiding the fact that I *still* had a crush on him—for one second. It dawned on me that couples gave each other goodnight kisses outside doorways, so I hurried inside and shut the door.

My heart raced as I leaned against it, squeezing my eyes shut to try and dispel the image of him. I dug my hand into my pocket, pulled out my diary, and held it to my chest.

I’ll write all my feelings here… and then dispose of them. It seemed like the only reasonable thing I could do. I couldn’t *tell* anyone about my secret feelings for Dawson, so why not write them down?

I recommitted to my plan: I’d let myself enjoy this trip, record my thoughts and feelings, then toss it into the sea. Except… What if tossing my diary into the sea rid me of my book, but not my feelings?

CHAPTER 9

The following day there were no festivities until the family campfires that night. Dawson said people brought their instruments and sang songs around the fires while roasting marshmallows. I didn't even know what a marshmallow was until he explained it. It didn't sound appealing to me, but he said I would like it.

I couldn't help but feel a twinkling of excitement for spending more time with Dawson. But that was so wrong. I shouldn't be excited to do anything with him. And if I wasn't careful, I had a feeling Dawson would catch on that I dressed as a soldier and fought in the Pirate Wars.

If someone else doesn't find out first.

I awoke earlier than normal, a sick feeling in my gut that Aunty Taimane would somehow find out the truth.

But how? My diary was the only way she would learn, and I resorted to having it safely in my pocket for the rest of the trip. She didn't come to get me that morning, much to my relief, so I decided to check on Princess Yesenia.

I truly didn't want there to be any enmity between us. She was fulfilling her royal obligations to marry Prince Dawson, and I needed to fulfill mine.

As I knocked on her bedroom door, I heard laughter. Was it Princess Yesenia? I couldn't ever recall hearing her laugh, or even smile. The princess's maid opened the door, looking rather cheerful.

Yesenia was still in bed, her personal guard sitting on a stool at her side. She looked like she had just laughed at something, probably something the guard said. But as soon as she saw me in the doorway, the smile fled and her eyebrows creased.

“Filia? Is something wrong? It’s early…”

“I’m sorry.” I curtsied. “I just wanted to check on you… to make sure you’re alright.”

Her look softened, but she pursed her lips and nodded, beckoning with her hand for me to enter. The guard, who sat at her side, immediately stood and bowed to me. He moved away so I could take the seat he left vacant.

He looked serious as ever, and it made me wonder how he could’ve said anything that would make Yesenia laugh.

She wore her thick white nightgown, with her dark hair in two long braids. Even having just woken up, she looked every bit a princess. She looked pretty.

Jealousy once again pounded against my chest but I forced it away with a smile.

“Are you feeling well?” I asked.

She nodded. “Whatever you did worked. I’d truly appreciate it if you could write exactly what you did so my doctor back home can replicate it.” Yesenia rubbed her forehead. “My head still hurt like it normally did, but the recovery was much faster than it’s ever been.”

I couldn’t help but feel the pride inside of myself. Each time I helped someone recover from an injury or ailment filled me with purpose.

It’s just too bad I’ll be stored away as an ornament to a tribal chief. Last night, looking at the plants of Alpenglow Kingdom fascinated me, and brought up a spark from the inside. But after I returned home to Sunrise Kingdom, I wouldn’t get to keep exploring the plant world and how I could make natural remedies from them.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “I’d be happy to do that.”

“What are your plans today anyway?” she asked, folding her arms.

“I’m quite tired, so I thought I’ll just stick around the castle.” Actually, I wanted to go to the library and read all the books the Alpenglow crown owned on botany and herbology. But I wouldn’t say it aloud. Because, again, I was betrothed, so my interests were no longer important.

I fully knew that after marrying Tevita, I would bear his children and raise them. While I wanted a family and children of my own, a part of me

still wanted to serve people with my skills and knowledge.

But it's alright. I had always done what my late father—and now my older brother, Iosefa—asked of me. It's what made me the perfect princess, after all.

"What are you thinking of doing?" I asked.

Yesenia shrugged. "The same as you. I'm exhausted." She smoothed her hair back and sighed. "I suppose I should spend time with Dawson though." Her voice was full of dread.

"I'm sure he would like that," I said, trying to assure her, but feeling my stomach knot a hundred times.

He told me he loved me… he almost tried to kiss me. It seemed so wrong I was here, with his betrothed. I felt like a traitor, a hypocrite.

But I told him off. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

If Yesenia read your diary, you would be ashamed. A lump formed in my throat.

I stood and curtsied. "Will you be at the campfire tonight?"

She nodded. "I should go."

"Do you want to go?" I couldn't help asking it. Yesenia kept doing the things she "should," but what about the things she wanted to do?

She stole a glance at the guard standing to the side, but his expression was serious as ever. Biting her lower lip, she nodded. "Of course, I want to go. I haven't had a chance to get to know Dawson. It will be good."

My heart ached, but I didn't know why. Looking at Yesenia was like looking in a mirror. We both did all the things we *should* do. But did we *want* to do those things?

She sat straight, as a perfect princess would. "I will see you then, Filia?"

"Yes. Looking forward to it." I curtsied again, she tipped her chin to me, and I left. As I closed the door behind me, I took a quick peek at the princess, her maid, and her guard.

The guard sat back in the chair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his expression grim. Yesenia avoided eye contact and rubbed her chin, looking away. It was such a sad sight.

He's too young to be her personal guard. And the way he looked at her said something else…

I shook my head and hurried to the library, knowing that I shouldn't ever assume anything about Princess Yesenia or her personal escorts.

After all, I didn't want people to assume things about me. I patted my diary in my pocket.

Everyone just assumes I'm a good, obedient princess. And I would keep it that way.

I SPENT most of the day in the library, immersed in the encyclopedias of Alpenglow Kingdom's various plants. I took breaks by grabbing a bite from the kitchen or strolling around the castle in the hopes of *not* bumping into Dawson. At one point I heard swords clashing and snuck around the corner.

A blush spread up my cheeks as I caught sight of Dawson and Vance sparring in the grassy plains outside the castle. They were sweating, and their shirts were mostly open. I rushed away, trying to replace the image of Dawson and his open shirt with the ferns and wildflowers of Alpenglow Kingdom. But it seemed nothing could distract me enough.

I finally went on a horseback ride alone before the campfire. The colorful trees mesmerized me, and I smiled the entire ride. Something about the autumn trees filled my soul. It was the same feeling I got when I swam in the ocean. There was something so pure, freeing, and edifying about being in this. I wished I could experience autumn every day, just as I once swam in the ocean every day.

It's so magical.

By the time I returned to the castle, it amazed me that I managed to avoid, well, everyone that day: Aunty Taimane, Dawson, Yesenia… *everyone.*

And it was much needed. By the time I got to the campfire, I was ready to socialize again. It didn't seem as hard or draining to put on a face. I was prepared to enjoy the festivities once more.

And I'm ready to keep Dawson at a distance.

Aunty Taimane and I walked together, and she gave me a cold silent treatment. I asked how her day went, but she only glared and said it was long.

"What did you do?" I asked.

She glared and then folded her arms. "I was working on something."

"On what?"

"It's a personal hobby of mine. I don't speak of it often." There was a rumor circulating that Aunty Taimane was once part of a dark witch's circle, but I didn't listen to gossip like that. The past was behind us… right?

Before I could ask what her personal hobby was, she said, “But I’m ready to return home.”

I didn’t get to reply because we reached the campfire. There were several campfires along the way, and each time we passed one, the people greeted us with friendly smiles or strums of the guitar.

Yesenia’s long dark hair was in a thick braid behind her back, and she wore a cream cotton dress with embroidered flowers on the chest and along the hem. I wore a plain burgundy dress, with a dark cloak around my shoulders. A ta’ovala sat around my waist, and, with my hair pulled up, I felt like myself… at least my nurse self. I hardly wore my hair down, more out of habit than choice. Being in the Pirate Wars—both as a soldier and a nurse—taught me to keep my hair out of the way.

Dawson sat beside Yesenia and looked like he was attempting a conversation, but by the looks of it, she gave him short answers.

I curtsied and then sat next to the princess. Aunty Taimane sat on the other side of me, her arms folded, her expression grumpy as ever.

“How did your day go?” Dawson asked, leaning forward to look at me.

I nodded. “It went well. And yours?”

He smiled. “It was busy. But good—I looked for you today. Where did you go?”

Yesenia looked from Dawson to me, her dark eyes tired.

“I spent most of the day in the library.” I sat back, hoping to end the conversation, but Dawson persisted. Did he not realize this was rude to Yesenia? We had to talk around her…

And I’m not even supposed to be talking to him!

“What were you reading?”

“Books on botany, herbology, plants…” I turned my attention to the fire, and Dawson got the hint. A servant passed around roasting sticks and square, white marshmallows.

At first, I was confused by the strange shape and texture. The marshmallow seemed almost… fake. But when I roasted and bit into it, I was delighted to discover it was like a sweet cloud melting in my mouth.

“Looks like a pillow,” Yesenia said, scowling at hers. She took a bite anyway and then gave the rest to her servant to dispose of. Her guard stayed close by, as usual, his eyes never leaving her.

He’s just protecting her, I told myself. Some ruling families of the Incandescent Kingdoms were constantly under threat of being attacked or

assassinated, like those at Starshine Kingdom. I wasn't familiar with Fireblaze Kingdom, but who knew if her family was also under threat? It didn't seem like an appropriate thing to ask Yesenia, so I tried a different approach. I asked Yesenia what sort of things she liked to do, but she replied, "I'm just not really into anything."

So the conversation was lacking. I asked Yesenia questions about Fireblaze Kingdom: What was her favorite thing about the kingdom? If a stranger was to visit her kingdom, what things would she recommend they see, try, or do?

Her answers remained short, and even when Dawson tried to stir up a conversation, she was distant and cold. I didn't blame her… she was out of her element.

But I am too. I was a fish out of water, experiencing all of this for the first time. After a while of trying to make small talk, I decided to just stare into the fire.

I wish Iosefa were here. He should've been here, enjoying this. Iosefa was going to get married in a few months, after my own wedding to Tevita.

I hope he's alright. I felt eyes on me and looked up to find Aunty Taimane glaring at me.

Why does she always do that? And why was she so intent on finding out about my feet? Wasn't she satisfied enough that I was marrying her son? What more did she want from me?

I heard stories of monster mothers-in-law, but I had to believe things would be alright between us, even if she never found out my secret. Which… I hoped she never found out my secret. Maybe she would just forget about the whole foot thing. I wanted to be a good princess and a good person. But the dread in my stomach said just because I desired to be good, didn't mean it was going to be easy. Aunty Taimane would certainly *not* make it easy.

When I thought Aunty Taimane's eyes couldn't burn into my skull any longer, she excused herself for the night.

Finally. She did give me a warning glance, as if to remind me to stay away from Dawson.

Or that she'll find out my secret. I couldn't help shuddering just thinking about her words earlier, that air bubbles always rise to the top.

"Fire's dying. I'm going to go grab some more wood," Dawson said, standing.

Yesenia rested her head in her palms and stared at the coals. “We’re all going to smell like smoke tonight,” she said.

“That’s the fun of it.” Dawson ignored the princess’s grumpy nature and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Anyone want to help me?”

Mallory and Prince Vance appeared at that moment, their hands interlaced.

“Oh, I’m so glad the princess is here!” Mallory said, curtsying to Yesenia then tipping her head to me. I could tell Mallory was making an effort to get to know Yesenia. After all, Yesenia would be Mallory’s future sister-in-law. Mallory took Dawson’s seat and swiped her long red hair back before diving into questions.

Guilt sank in my stomach as Yesenia looked rather tired from all the questions that night. I stood, knowing I shouldn’t leave… yet wanting an excuse to not watch the princess.

“Your highness.” Yesenia’s guard interrupted. I wished I had learned his name. After all, he was with her all the time. She looked up at him, almost relieved. “You look weary. Would you like me to get something for you—perhaps some water?” He knelt next to her.

Yesenia nodded. “Yes. Water. I could use some water.”

When he stood to leave, she popped up. “Wait. I’ll come with you. I’m very parched.” She excused herself, leaving us with Mallory and Vance.

“Well… does anyone want to help me get some wood?” Dawson asked again, and I could feel his invisible reach, begging me to join him. Before Mallory or Vance could answer, I piped up.

“I can help you.”

Dawson and I walked towards a barn in the distance. It was dark, but the moon lit the path before us. Dirt and leaves crunched beneath our boots and I wrapped my cloak tighter around me.

“She looks tired,” I said. The words came out to no one in particular. I just didn’t know what else to say.

“I agree. I almost feel…” Dawson searched for the word. “I almost feel bad for her. She always seems tired.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to cheer her up.”

Dawson said nothing, and as we rounded the side of the barn, piles of wood were carefully stacked on top of each other. I reached for a log and began putting a pile of wood on my arms when I realized Dawson was gone.

“Dawson?” I looked around and placed the wood on the ground again. The trees rustled against each other in the wind, and a wolf howled in the distance. If the prince was playing a trick on me, it wouldn't be funny. Moonlight covered the empty fields in the distance, and a lonely scarecrow swayed in the wind. I shuddered. As much as I loved autumn, I had to admit this was a little spooky.

“Dawson?” I rounded the side of the barn and jumped as Dawson collided into me. “What are you doing?” I exclaimed, falling against his hard chest. He caught me, his hands on my arms.

“What are you doing—”

“Looking for you!” I pushed him away, my heart pattering. Why was he so warm?

“I was checking inside the barn to see if there was more wood.”

“Well, watch where you’re going.” I stood against the stacks, rubbing my forehead, trying to pull my wits together.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.” Dawson looked at me once, then did a double take, and flutters filled my stomach. “I didn’t know you got startled so easily,” he said.

“I don’t startle easily.” I spoke too soon, because it was a lie. Ever since the Pirate Wars, things caught me off guard like crazy. Even just the sound of footsteps on wood floors made me cringe.

Dawson stood in front of me, and just when I thought he was going to flirt with me by resting his arm against the wood behind me, he pulled a log.

But I was frozen in place, watching as he stacked the logs on one arm. “You know, Filia,” he said. “Sometimes I wonder if you’re hiding something.”

“What gives you that idea?” I should’ve moved, instead of letting him stand right there, practically pinning me in place. But all I could think about was how nice he smelled, like pine and campfire smoke.

“Let’s see… You’re an excellent fighter. You’re incredibly smart. You’re brave in the face of danger. You don’t run from a fight.” He looked down at me. “So what is it, Filia? Is there a secret behind why you’re not like any other princess I know?”

“No.” My voice came out quiet.

It was as if Dawson now only realized how close we were, and the wood dropped to the ground as his arms rested against the stack behind me.

“Why won’t you let me kiss you?” he asked, his tone suddenly serious.

My fingers tingled. “Because we’re both betrothed. You know we shouldn’t.”

Dawson studied me, his eyes pouring into my soul again.

“Dawson, stop…”

But he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “I’m planning to speak to my father… Maybe I’ll even talk to him tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to marry Yesenia. I want to marry you.”

My heart skipped a beat. How could I feel so elated and guilty at the same time?

“But we can’t—”

“Why not?”

“Our betrothals.”

“Is that the only reason?” He sounded serious as ever, and I knew he was onto my secret. I knew he was onto my feelings too. How could I hide them? It was so obvious… I even came out here to get wood with him *alone.* After I told myself a *million* times *not* to be alone with Dawson, I had volunteered and put myself in this situation.

“No.”

“Then what is the reason we can’t be together, Filia? Does it really have to do with honor? With royal obligations?” He moved a loose piece of hair from my face as I shook my head.

“I can’t tell you.”

“So you are hiding something.” The corner of his lip turned up. “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

“No.” The word came out in haste.

“You won’t tell your secrets, princess, even to the man who loves you more than anything in this world?”

“How can you know that? How can you know that you love me with all of your heart?” I asked, my stomach doing all sorts of somersaults.

“I’ve spent enough time with you, watched you long enough to know that I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else.” Dawson smiled. “Now can I kiss you?”

“No.” This time I pushed him away, my heart pounding in my ears. I *wanted* him to kiss me, but I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

I’m a good princess. I won’t engage in this behavior.

“Why are you so persistent?” I withdrew from Dawson, stacking logs onto my arm in frustration. The work proved somewhat distracting from the adrenaline racing through my body.

“Because I’m listening to my heart.” He was patient with me.

“Well did it ever occur to you that your heart might be wrong?”

“No.”

“Sometimes it is.” *I* would know.

“Are you sure about that?”

“You have to use your mind and your heart, and you’re not listening to your logic.”

Dawson folded his arms and leaned against the wood. I gave him a look, then motioned to the logs.

“Come on, are you going to help me or not?”

“Filia, does the secret you’re hiding have to do with your legs or feet?”

I froze. “No.” Why was I so quick to lie?

“When we were at Aquagleam Kingdom together, fighting off pirates with our siblings, you said you were just tired, and that’s why you were limping.” His eyes narrowed. “But since you arrived, you’ve been limping a lot.”

“I’m not limping. I mean… I haven’t been limping.” But just thinking about how long I’d been on my feet made my legs ache.

I want to sit down.

Then hurry up and get out of here.

“Do you trust me?” Dawson asked.

“Yes.”

“Then please…” He stepped forward, taking the wood from my arms. “Will you tell me, Filia? What are you hiding?”

I faltered. The prince was so genuine, so true… while I’d lied for a very long time. I swallowed hard, my hand instinctively going to the diary in my pocket.

“I can’t tell you…” For a moment, I just wanted to break into tears. Why couldn’t I tell my secret? Why couldn’t someone, besides Heilani, know?

“Why not?”

“It will ruin everything.” I would be demoted as a princess, maybe even an outcast. I would be a shame to the crown of Sunrise Kingdom for blatantly disobeying the law.

“Will it ruin a chance of us being together?” he asked, serious as ever.

I hadn’t thought about it, but I nodded. The king of Alpenglow Kingdom would be disgusted by me if he found out, and he would see me as unworthy of marrying his son. All kings and queens were people of the law, and they respected other laws of the various Incandescent Kingdoms.

Dawson looked away, and I knew a million thoughts must have run through his head, each of them ending with the question: *What is her secret?*

Before he thought I was probably some promiscuous princess, I whispered. “It’s the Pirate Wars, Dawson.”

He didn’t reply, but nodded. Did he know? Did he guess? Or, perhaps, did he see me on his ship so long ago, but never said a word? Was he waiting for me to spill everything?

I can’t.

“Come on.” Dawson offered a small smile, then grabbed more logs before motioning for us to return to the campfire. The whole rest of the night my mind kept asking, *What if?*

What if I opened myself to the possibility of being with Dawson? What if he spoke to his father that night and then told me we could be together? But what if the truth was uncovered?

Then we could never be together… Could I allow myself to dream of being with Dawson while I kept a burdensome secret inside for the rest of our lives?

As I went to sleep that night, I realized the truth. It weighed on my mind. How could I ever allow myself to fully love Dawson if I kept a secret from him? *I can’t.*

CHAPTER 10

Aunty Taimane knocked on the door the following morning. It was a distinct knock: loud and abrupt. I hurried to dress, though I just wanted to keep sleeping. There were no festivities today, as people prepared for the Autumn ball the following night. But Dawson insisted on showing me his favorite waterfall.

“Don’t worry,” he said before bidding me good night, “Mallory, Vance, and Yesenia will be there.” Then he winked, saluted, and left me standing at my bedroom door, my hands clammy from holding his arm.

“Filia, are you up?” Aunty Taimane beat her hand on the door, causing me to jump from my daydream.

“Yes, one moment please.” As I looked at my long, dark, wavy hair in the mirror, I almost whipped it up like I normally did. But then I thought of the previous night, and how Dawson did a double-take at me. It made my heart want to soar.

But it’s not right. We couldn’t be together because I wouldn’t be able to keep a secret from him. I loved him too much to do that.

As for my betrothed… That was another story. Tevita probably had no interest in my life. In the past, he had several opportunities to meet me, but never did. Aunty Taimane always came around, judging me instead. After Tevita missed multiple chances to meet me, I realized I meant nothing to him. He was much older than me and didn’t seem to care for the royal family.

It shouldn't be hard to keep the secret from him. Perhaps I was judging him before even meeting him, but if Tevita couldn't give me a little time so we could introduce ourselves, why would he make time for me in our marriage?

"Filia, will you open this door?"

I did so, and Aunty Taimane stepped in, looking me up and down. "You're wearing your hair down today?"

"Well, it's halfway up—"

"Don't talk back to me." At that, I silenced and noticed her scanning my room. Her eyes landed on the diary, sitting on my nightstand. Before I could grab it, she walked over in two quick strides and picked it up.

"That's mine—" I didn't mean to be so aggressive, but she had shown no courtesy herself. I pried it out of her hands. I looked down at the brown leather, making sure the straps tied around it were tight. Then I slipped it into the pocket of my light blue dress.

"You use a diary made by the people of Alpenglow?" She tsked. "Do you have no pride for the bookmakers of our kingdom?" She smelled odd again, like poisonous berries and herbs from the islands.

"It was a gift," I said. Malosi, my second oldest brother, got it for me from Alpenglow Kingdom during the Pirate Wars. Though I loved all my siblings, I was closest to Malosi. He seemed to understand me like nobody else. At the moment, he was on a honeymoon with his bride… which was another reason I was here, instead of him. He was the next oldest and should have attended the Fall Festival in Iosefa's place, but Malosi deserved to enjoy his honeymoon.

Aunty Taimane glared. "It looks like a commoner's book. There's nothing regal about it."

"I like it," I muttered, then followed her out.

We met up with everyone outside the castle, and I felt so under-dressed standing next to Yesenia. She had her hair beautifully curled, falling in locks down her back. Her crimson cotton dress was stunning on her, drawing out the darkness of her eyes.

I looked like a peasant, with my light blue dress, tied at the front, and my long white sleeves falling down my arms.

"Good morning." Dawson passed behind me, tipping his head, then letting his hand brush across my back as he kept walking. It was certainly flirtatious, even if nobody saw it.

Yesenia folded her arms, looking at the woods as if uncomfortable. Her guard stood behind her, watching everyone with distrust.

Dawson and Vance both armed themselves with bows and arrows. When I gave the Crown Prince a questioning look, he shrugged and said, “It’s always better to be prepared when you go into the woods.”

Mallory was also armed with a bow and arrows and admitted that she’d once been a ranger.

“What’s that?” I asked as we began our hike. Dawson and Vance took the lead, with Yesenia and her guard closely behind. Aunty Taimane chose not to come, saying three miles was too long of a hike for her.

She gave me a look before we left though, and I knew what it meant: *Stay away from Dawson.* I nodded, telling myself I would *not* make myself available to be alone with him. Ever.

Yet, Yesenia didn’t seem to make herself available for Dawson, and I wished she would. He was her betrothed, after all. Instead, Yesenia’s guard stayed next to her, like they were inseparable.

“A forest ranger scouts the areas around the village they’re assigned to, and they keep the people safe. But my family had a vendetta against the royal family,” Mallory explained, keeping a brisk pace. We hadn’t gone far, with the leaves crunching beneath our boots and the trees swaying above us, when my feet began to tire.

How can I hike for three miles? It seemed impossible.

I listened to Mallory’s story as much as I could, laughing when she told me how she and Vance first met. She almost killed him by trying to steal his enchanted rose, but, instead, they fell in love. After a while, though, she seemed eager to walk ahead with Vance. Embarrassment welled inside of me.

I’m not out of shape… But I looked like it. I swiped sweat forming on my forehead, caused by the tingling pain shooting through my legs and feet, and from the general effort of the hike.

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up,” I told her, and so Mallory left me. Alone on the path, I took my time.

Maybe I won’t make it to the falls, I thought. I paused, trying to catch my breath. A nearby log caught my attention and I didn’t hesitate to sit.

I’m so tired. For whatever reason, I just wanted to cry. There I was, left behind because my feet hurt so badly every time I took a step.

And it's all my fault. Nobody told me to dress up as a soldier and fight in the Pirate Wars. Any princess in her right mind would have *never* done such a thing.

I thought of all the times I did the *right* thing as a princess, and how good that felt. Once, when I was nine years old, I scolded Heilani for getting her dress all muddy after a particularly rainy day. Heilani rolled her eyes at me, which earned a swift word from my mother.

"Heilani, don't you dare roll your eyes. That is unladylike, and not what a proper princess does."

Heilani glared at her food while mother addressed me. "And Filia, thank you for modeling how a princess should not only behave, but how she should hold herself and how she should dress."

I'd felt so proud of myself at the time, but the gap between Heilani and I grew with each year. By being a perfect princess, I was earning the approval of my parents while distancing myself from my younger sister.

I sighed and stared at the yellow leaves scattered around the forest floor.

The sound of footsteps approached, and I looked to see the person I vowed never to be alone with again. Yet there we were. Again.

"Are you alright, Filia?" Dawson knelt on the ground beside me, and it was so sweet, I just wanted to kiss his forehead. His dark hair was tousled from his own quick pace, but his green eyes lit up when he looked at me.

"I'm fine. I'll catch up." I motioned with my hand. "You go on without me. I'm just slow."

"Because of your legs?" The question came out swiftly. He was definitely onto my secret.

"Dawson, why do you keep doing this?" I rubbed my forehead, to which he gently took my hands.

"Doing what?"

I pulled my hands away. "*That.* Stop. Please." He was only making this harder.

Dawson rested his elbow on his knee and looked at the ground for a moment. "I have an idea," he said.

"What?"

"Come on." He stood and offered his hand. I hesitated before taking it, but when I did, he pulled me into the trees. "There's a lower falls around here that I used to come to all the time."

"We should stay on the path. And we're not supposed to be alone—"

“I know my way around.” Why did it feel so good to have our hands together like this? My heart ached. As we made our way through the forest, I couldn’t help admiring the warm colors, while breathing in the fresh air. I was so enchanted by the lovely feelings, my foot slipped on a wet log and pain shot up my legs.

I gasped, but Dawson caught me.

“Ouch…” I winced and bent over, grabbing my right foot. Before seeing it, I knew what had happened: I sprained my ankle.

Just great.

“It’s sprained,” I said, but before I could tell Dawson we needed to go back, he scooped me into his arms and carried me. “Dawson, we shouldn’t __”

“We’re not far.”

Why was he so warm, so cozy to be close to? I could feel his strong muscles through his white shirt, and hear his heart beating through his dark tunic.

“I spoke to my father last night,” he said. My heart skipped a beat.

“What did he say?”

“He doesn’t doubt my feelings for you, but he is a respecter of the law.”

A lump formed in my throat. So the king of Alpenglow Kingdom didn’t approve of us being together, because I was betrothed already. He would never infringe on the laws and customs of other kingdoms.

Dawson didn’t seem deterred though. “If your betrothal is canceled, he is willing to cancel mine to Yesenia.” He drew in a short breath, but, surprisingly, didn’t seem bothered at all by carrying me. “Father warned me not to do anything that would be inappropriate or even appear to be scandalous with you.”

“Like this?”

“Exactly.” The corner of his lip turned up.

What in the world Dawson? He didn’t seem like the type to disobey his father…

Unless it’s for me…

The sound of rushing water filled the air and we stepped into a clearing. A coolness surrounded us, and the warm-colored leaves rustled as a breeze came through the area.

I gaped. “This is…” I couldn’t even find the words for it. Could “beautiful” really describe such a scene? A snow white waterfall rushed

down into an aqua-colored pool. The pool was so bright, it looked like the seawater back home. But the fallen leaves on the pool were like warm-toned jewels that glistened on the top.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" Dawson set me down, then didn't hesitate to tend to my ankle. I withdrew my feet, completely forgetting our surroundings, panic coming over me.

"I'm fine."

"It needs tending."

"I'm the nurse, I can take care of it later."

"We don't have ice, but you could probably put it in the pool. The water is cold enough." It was a good idea, and my ankle burned.

But then he'll see my foot. I'd survived a lot of pain before, so why not just an hour or two before getting back to the castle?

I wouldn't be able to walk on it… And I certainly did not expect Dawson to carry me the entire way back.

"Fine. Don't look."

"It's not inappropriate for me to see your ankle." A sparkle lit up Dawson's eyes. He knew, as well as I, that the people of Sunrise Kingdom walked around in sandals, sometimes even barefoot. Once upon a time, it was probably inappropriate to show one's ankles in the culture of Alpenglow Kingdom, but times had changed with the intermingling of the Incandescent Kingdoms.

"Just turn the other way," I said, and Dawson did so. I slowly made my way to the edge of the pool. The leaves and roots surrounding made it hard not to slip, but I managed to get to the water without falling in. I checked that Dawson, indeed, had his back turned, then removed my suede boots and clean white socks.

Seeing my feet, so ugly and deformed, in the middle of such a beautiful setting, made my stomach knot.

What was I thinking? I lifted my leggings, revealing my skinny, odd-shaped shins and calves. They looked like skeletons, with my brown, creased, and wrinkled skin stretching over them. How long had it been since my ugly feet and legs had seen the light of day?

I put them in the water, and an iciness surrounded them. But I wasn't satisfied when I could still see the deformed legs and feet. I inched closer into the pool, using my palms to scoot myself down.

"Are you going to make me sit like this the whole time you ice them?"

“No. Just… hang on.” I scooted closer, parts of my dress beginning to soak up water.

Just a little deeper. If I could get the water up to my knees, he wouldn’t see a thing. Just as the water touched the bottom of my knees, my hand slipped on a mossy root. A yelp escaped me as I fell into the water, the entire lower half of my body going under.

Iciness struck my body like pins and needles. Dawson was there in an instant, pulling me out, his hands under my shoulders.

And there was no hiding my feet as I collapsed onto the wet, colorful leaves and roots outside the pool. He didn’t hesitate to take his cloak off and wrap it around me. A million thoughts went through my mind as he saw my feet.

Oh no. He’s going to be disgusted.

He’ll know what I did.

A second thought surfaced. *My diary!* I grabbed it out of my pocket, relieved to see that the leather exterior protected most of the journal, while the edges of the pages were wet.

“Filia.” Dawson’s expression showed nothing but shock. “This looks like an injury from being in battles…” He looked up. “In war.”

I tucked my feet under my dress and shivered. Though I was cold, I also felt hot. He was the only person to see my feet apart from the doctor who tended to me after the battle.

“You said last night your secret had to do with the Pirate Wars…” The prince leaned in, rubbing my arms to help warm me. I felt like an idiot.

I should’ve never tried to put my feet in the water. But the ankle still burned, so I swallowed hard and returned my feet to the pool. Dawson sat beside me, placing his arm around my shoulders. It was so cozy, so sweet. Everything about it was so right and so wrong.

“What happened Filia?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“It’ll ruin everything.” At this, my vision grew blurry. Dawson held me closer, and I couldn’t help leaning into him. Why did I make such a terrible mistake?

He was quiet for a moment, and I felt nothing but his hand gently rubbing my arm. Then he kissed my temple, and my entire body warmed. I’d been kissed on the cheek many times before, but this… this was

something else entirely. “We can work through whatever it is together. I’ll fight for you, Filia.”

“You’ve done enough fighting,” I said, and a small sob escaped. “And I’ve done enough fighting.” His hand moved from my arm to my back, stroking it gently.

“Did you fight in the Pirate Wars?” he asked. I didn’t answer, but looked down, blinking away my tears.

Should I tell him? He had been onto my secret for a while. After a painstaking silence, I nodded ever so slightly.

He doesn’t need to know all that I did, like dressing up as a man, or the fact that I was on his ship, or that I rescued him…

“Filia…” He turned and faced me, then cupped my chin with his other hand. “I have fought many battles, and when the wars ended, I told myself I was done fighting.” He leaned in so his forehead touched mine. I knew we shouldn’t be that close, but every part of me ached for him.

“But I would fight a hundred times over in the Pirate Wars if I got to be with you at the end."

Despite the cold surrounding my feet and ankles, and the chill from being wet in the autumn air, warmth filled me. His nose brushed mine as he leaned in to kiss me. I wasn’t about to stop him either. I never wanted to kiss Dawson as badly as I wanted to now. His words were sweeter than any cinnamon roll in the world.

Just as his lips brushed mine, he pulled away, looking behind us.

“Dawson?” Vance’s voice was followed by footsteps, breaking twigs, and crunching leaves. Dawson pulled away from me, though my cheeks turned a burning red color.

Dawson and I almost kissed. It was unfair that we were *so* close to kissing.

Vance was followed by Mallory, Yesenia, and her guard. For a split second, Dawson looked as starry-eyed as I felt, but, being a prince, he pulled himself together.

“Filia sprained her ankle so we came here to ice it.”

Horror filled me that the rest of the company would see my deformed legs and feet, and I hurried to spread my wet dress over them.

Too late.

Yesenia looked from me to Dawson, her expression full of disappointment and irritation.

Oh no. What have I done? I almost kissed Dawson. That's what happened…

And now, looking at Yesenia, Vance, and Mallory, I knew it was a dishonorable thing to do. It was disrespectful and unfaithful to the people betrothed to Dawson and me. There was no way I could hide what just happened, and as we made our way back to the castle, the hike spoiled by my and Dawson's little escape, I knew there was no way we could be together. Even if we wanted it, my secret prevented it.

So why, then, did I keep dreaming about it?

CHAPTER II

I left my diary out to dry on my nightstand while I made my way to the library. It was late, but I couldn't sleep. The almost-kiss kept replaying in my mind.

How could I want Dawson so badly yet not be allowed to have him? It was so unfair.

But this is the life of a princess. Perfect princesses didn't complain about their duties. That was one of the first things my tutor forced into my young mind.

"Princesses are happy to do whatever the king and or queen commands them to do." That's what the tutor said. I remembered looking out the window at the ocean, imagining my younger sisters splashing and playing at the beach with our cousins, having fun… all while I was being schooled.

It was always so unfair. Heilani, my younger sister, told me it was unfair that I was given the special princess treatment and she was not. She and I couldn't go back and redo things, and almost everything we experienced was forced on us by our parents. But because I was the "lucky one" who got to go to princess lessons, I became the "perfect" princess.

Until now. Today. I almost kissed Dawson. His lips barely touched mine… we were so close to a real kiss!

A forbidden kiss. What was I thinking?

With my night robe on, I closed the door to the library. I should've brought my diary to write things, even if it was still drying, but all I could

do was sit on the settee and stare at the fire. A few books sat on my lap, but I didn't have the energy or focus to read them. A light rain began to pour outside, and I rested my head on the armrest, enjoying the sound.

The pattering of raindrops on the window panes, combined with the crackling of the fire, made me want to sit here forever. It made me want to release all my worries, guilt, fears, and secrets…

But I can't.

I could just pretend there's nothing wrong, I thought. But it felt like everything was wrong. Dawson now knew my secret—well, part of it. And he knew I had feelings for him. I did nothing to resist him or his kiss.

He said if I told him the truth, we could work together through it. He would fight for me.

But I'm tired of fighting. The Pirate Wars had been too long, too depressing…

But he said he would fight, not me… I rubbed my forehead, knowing that I couldn't do this to him. It wasn't fair. If he married me, and my secrets were known, it would be shameful. Sadness overwhelmed me at the consequences of my choices made so long ago. If only I'd stuck to my princess lessons. If only I hadn't taken any stupid risks. The impossibility of my situation weighed on my shoulders like a hundred pounds.

I'm so sad. I brought my knees to my chest, hugging them.

Dawson isn't sad anymore. I remembered sitting on the bench with him, cinnamon rolls in our hands as he told me he was at peace.

I'm not. I felt like a hurricane inside, with a tumult of emotions and a whirl of secrets… secrets that could ruin everything.

The clicking of the library door drew my attention and I sat up to find Dawson stepping in, a tray of mugs and cinnamon rolls in his hands.

Oh no.

"Dawson you shouldn't—we shouldn't," I said, already standing to leave. But he placed the tray on the low table, between the fireplace and settee, then pulled me into an embrace.

My initial reaction was to push him away, but everything about the embrace was so comforting, so assuring, that I couldn't resist. I wrapped my arms around him and let him hold me.

"I'm sorry about today," he said after a long while. "I shouldn't have put you in a position like I did."

So he finally decided to be a gentleman?

“You made it clear that we shouldn’t go off alone but I was insistent, and I’m sorry.”

He smelled so good, like the woods and fresh mountain air. His shirt was slightly open, revealing his muscled chest. Of course, I didn’t mind one bit.

But I should.

Dawson stroked my hair. “Can you forgive me, Filia?”

“Well if you were really sorry, you wouldn’t be here *alone* with me. Again.” I pulled away and tried to conceal a smile as I looked up at him. The corner of his lip turned up as the light from the fireplace burned in his green eyes.

“I couldn’t sleep. I saw you in here when I walked past and couldn’t resist.” He motioned to the treats on the table. “I brought something for you.”

I sat on the settee and took one of the mugs. The cozy cocoa smell warmed me, and I smiled at the whipped cream on top. Dawson sat next to me—a little too close—then took a drink of his hot cocoa.

He made a face while I smiled after tasting it. “This is delicious.” It had a sweet and rich cocoa taste along with… something else.

“They put pumpkin spice in everything, I hate it.” Dawson placed the hot cocoa back on the tray.

“I like it.” I took another sip, then froze when the prince rubbed my back.

“Dawson—”

“I can’t help it.” He scooted closer. “I’m going to talk to Yesenia tomorrow about our betrothal. I’m sure she’ll understand—if she hasn’t already figured it out…” His cheeks warmed. “Especially after today. Can you talk to your aunt? I want to be with you, Filia.” His fingers brushed my cheek as he tucked a piece of hair from my face. “Do you want to be with me?”

I hadn’t admitted it out loud. I’d written about being with Dawson many times in my diary, or at least some expression of my desire to be with Dawson, but I’d never truly admitted it.

I thought about the implications of saying yes. It wasn’t bad to admit one’s feelings, was it? I didn’t have to bury feelings for Dawson like the secrets from my past, did I?

Slowly, I nodded.

“You said earlier that you fought in the Pirate Wars.” Dawson stroked my hair. “I knew that, Filia. I saw you.”

My entire body went numb. “What—you couldn’t have…” My voice was barely a whisper.

“I thought it was a dream, but the more I think about it, the more I realize it was real.”

I stared, and he took a slow breath. “There was a night where I almost died. We were in a bay at Sunrise Kingdom, and it was such a dark night. Usually, the moon shone on the water, making it possible to see other ships in the distance. Or there’d be a lighthouse with soldiers keeping watch. But, for whatever reason, I thought it’d be alright to stay the night in that dark bay.”

I could remember the scene so clearly in my own mind, and I bit my lower lip, trying to forget it all. But Dawson was there. It was horrifying. Terrifying.

“We were attacked by pirates. It was a complete surprise. I wasn’t ready, nor were my men. We scrambled to fight, but before we knew it cannons went off everywhere and our ship was blown to pieces.” He paused and rubbed his forehead, taking another steadying breath. It was like reliving the nightmare. Did I want him to keep going? Because at the end of this story was us—me and him.

“A cannon went off and I don’t remember everything, but I was tossed into the water.” At this, Dawson met my eyes. “Someone rescued me. Pulled me to shore…”

I tried to look away, but he cupped my chin, locking our eyes again. “When I awoke, there was a girl holding me. She was crying.”

My own eyes started watering. I didn’t want to relive this. My feet and legs tingled just thinking about it. When I held Dawson that dark night, *I* was bleeding to death. But all I could think about at that moment, sitting under the swaying palms, the cannons still going off in the distance, was him. I prayed over and over that he was alive, that he would be alright.

Then he opened his eyes, and I slipped away… but not before he looked right at me. I thought he would forget, or that he was too delirious to recognize me.

But Dawson, sitting next to me, had known all along. He nodded. “It was you, Filia. Ever since that moment, I’ve tried to keep a distance from

you. I wasn’t going to accuse a princess—especially someone as proper as you—of dressing as a soldier and going to war.”

I licked my lips and wiped a stray tear. Why was I crying? Was it because he knew all along, or that my secret was out? Was it because now Dawson understood why we couldn’t be together?

“I broke the laws of my people,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was you?” Dawson ignored my comment, stroking my cheek. He was getting closer and closer to me.

“I couldn’t. Dawson, don’t you get it? This will ruin everything.”

“You saved me, Filia.” His other hand wove its way into my hair, drawing me closer to him. “I can’t ever repay you—”

“You don’t have to.” My voice came out as a whisper. Dawson’s face was right there, and my heart was pounding so hard. My secret was out. Dawson knew all along. So what could keep us apart?

The law.

“Can I kiss you?” He was thinking about anything but the law. How could he when we were so close to each other?

In spite of my intentions to stay loyal to our royal duties, I tipped my head, nodding ever so slightly. Dawson didn’t hesitate, his lips closing over mine. He tasted like hot cocoa and smelled like the woods, and everything seemed to go silent. I didn’t even hear the crackling of the fireplace, or the rain falling outside.

But then he kissed me again, and I realized it took my breath away. I melted into him, wrapping my arms around his neck, needing him like I needed air. His hands were rough but moved in such a gentle way, it was as if he knew how fragile and terrified I was. His kiss was deep as the sea, yet steadying as an anchor, pulling me away from the storm-tossed waves gnawing at my heart.

I love Dawson. And I was kissing him back, though I truly shouldn’t have.

CHAPTER 12

I awoke the next morning with a big smile on my face, though I shouldn't have felt so elated. A union between Dawson and me was still *so* impossible. The king of Alpenglow Kingdom would be disappointed in me for breaking the laws of my people. I would be unworthy to marry his son. After all, if I couldn't keep the laws of Sunrise Kingdom, why would I keep the laws of Alpenglow Kingdom? I would be a shame to place on the throne.

Unless… I rubbed my forehead. *Unless we both kept this secret a secret…* I could still burn my diary. After talking to Aunty Taimane and somehow breaking off my own betrothal to Tevita, Dawson and I could keep my secret a secret… *forever.*

He loves me. He would do that for me, right? I had always been so dead set on being a proper and perfect princess, and because this now involved a union with Dawson, I had to keep up that image.

Yet… how could I convince Aunty Taimane to break off the betrothal? Before my mind explored the options, it wandered to the kiss the previous night. It was so romantic, so right… and so wrong. Why did it feel like the world was against us?

The world isn't against you, I thought. *I made a choice, and so I brought these consequences on myself.*

But Dawson loved me, and that was enough, right? I thought about his kiss, about the way he held me, the feel of his hands, the warmth of his

body. I had fallen head over heels with him and only admitted it last night.

The rolling sound of thunder had finally pulled us apart, as neither of us was interested in ending the kisses. But it was late, and if someone saw us, it would be the biggest scandal of the Fall Festival.

Dawson escorted me to my room, and before we parted, he held me in a long, warm embrace. A million thoughts ran through my mind, with the biggest one being: *How?*

How could we be together?

As I prepared for the day, I hardly heard Aunty Taimane's loud knock on the door, my mind in a daze about the previous night. The Fall Festival was finally ending and we were scheduled to sail home in two day's time…

If I return home.

"Filia? I heard you sprained your ankle yesterday. Are you able to walk?"

"Yes." I was hobbling around, but it wasn't so bad.

"They said we're going apple picking today." The door handle shook again and I rolled my eyes. Why was she like this? "Will you hurry up?"

"I'm coming." I passed the nightstand, checking my diary to see if the pages had dried. Most of it had dried, but the leather had soaked some moisture. I would leave it to keep drying that day. I hurried out, locking the door behind me. Aunty Taimane gave me a look. "There's a rumor going around."

"About what?"

"About you and that prince." My cheeks heated. Had someone caught us last night?

"What are they saying?"

"That you two ran off on the hike. Is that true?"

"Dawson was just showing me a—"

"Filia!" She stomped her foot, making her seem so much bigger than me. "I will *not* tolerate such inappropriate behavior. If you are to marry my son, you will be proper, appropriate, and wise, do you hear me?"

"Yes ma'am." A new idea entered my mind… what if I could anger Aunty Taimane into breaking the betrothal? "At least Dawson takes time to get to know me," I said, though my voice felt small under her piercing gaze. "Tevita hasn't even met me yet."

"Because he's actually doing useful things, unlike that childish prince who runs around doing nothing."

“Does not—”

“Don’t you dare speak back to me, young lady.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to walk away, when she yanked my arm. “You *will* marry my son,” she said, her voice cutting. Being this close, the strange smoke-smell on her was overwhelming. What did she do when she was alone? “And you will do so in an honorable way.” Her long fingers squeezed my arm, causing me to wince. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes—”

“No. You don’t. If I see you with that boy again, there will be consequences.” For whatever reason, when she said the word “consequences” my blood went cold. She shoved my arm away and then smoothed out her ta’ovala. “Come on. We’re going to be late.”

When I was numb in place, my arm throbbing from her iron grasp, she gave me a look. “If you care about those you love, you would obey my orders.”

A lump formed in my throat. Was she… threatening me?

“Hurry up.” She started walking and I followed, my head pulsing. What just happened?

I have no idea… But I did know one thing. I couldn’t let Aunty Taimane see me with Dawson, at least not flirting.

Why not? If she broke off my betrothal to Tevita, that would be perfect! But my blood ran so cold, I had a bad feeling that there might be more going on with Aunty Taimane than I thought.

An old feeling returned, one that replaced even the ecstasy of kissing Dawson: *I have to be the perfect princess.* It was so wrong of me to kiss him last night, or to even imagine a future together. He knew my secret, but he’d have to keep it. Because if he didn’t, I would be demoted as a princess. And then I was truly powerless. I wouldn’t even be good for marrying Tevita. I dug my hand into my pocket, realizing I’d stuck the locket of my sister’s hair in it.

Shame filled me.

What have I done? I’d been a terrible, *terrible* example to my sisters. I let them down because I kissed Dawson and was not true to my royal duties. What was that teaching them? I could see their faces: Heilani, Atamai, and Luni. I loved them so much.

I have to be the perfect princess. I must confront Dawson, tell him to keep a distance and that things couldn’t work between us. I wanted to be a

good example of a princess for my sisters, and a royal from Sunrise Kingdom.

Why did I kiss him? As I followed Aunty Taimane, my heart ached. *What have I done?*

THE SMELL of the apple orchards reminded me of my first day here in Alpenglow Kingdom, when Dawson's horse spooked, and he landed on top of me. He was going to kiss me, even back then! My cheeks heated just thinking that we actually kissed last night, but I quickly scanned the rows for Dawson, knowing I needed to avoid him.

I spotted him with Vance and Mallory, each of them helping the citizens load up heavy barrels of apples onto a wagon.

Aunty Taimane caught me looking, and I hurried to grab a basket and make myself busy.

"Princess Filia?"

My heart sank. It was Yesenia. I forced a smile. "Good morning, princess."

"Good morning." Her face seemed unusually pale and tired, but she lifted her chin when I looked at her. "May I have a word with you?" she asked.

I could guess what it would be about, and I dreaded the confrontation, but I nodded. I had to stay away from Dawson anyways. "Of course."

She held her basket like a proper princess, nodded to her guard, and he stepped back a few paces from us. As we walked through the rows of trees, occasionally picking apples, Yesenia spoke first.

"I'm not very good with words." She cleared her throat. "So you will have to forgive me if I sound unkind in any way."

Oh no. Here it comes.

"I can't help but notice that you and Prince Dawson have a strong friendship." Yesenia swallowed and slowly picked a bright red apple, staring at it, as if searching for words. "I know you've both known each other from previous encounters. And your younger sister and his younger brother are married but…" She licked her lips and placed the apple in her basket. "But I wanted to ask you if there's something more than just…. Friendship…" Yesenia glanced at me, then looked away, finishing her sentence. "Between you two."

Guilt weighed on me, as though someone had placed a large barrel of apples on my shoulders. I just wanted to apologize and beg Yesenia's forgiveness. I was like her, a princess pawn. Nobody cared what happened to us, so why did I have to make her upcoming marriage so much more complicated, maybe even turbulent, by *kissing* Dawson? By even having feelings for Dawson?

I know better! Self-loathing filled me. Why was I so disgusting? Why did I lack any self-control? *I'm supposed to be a proper princess.*

"Dawson and I…" I stared at my basket, half full of apples. "We have had adventures together in the past. So…" What could I even say? I was such a despicable human being. "We are good friends. But…"

Nothing more? Was I really going to lie to Yesenia's face? Especially when I kissed Dawson the previous night?

I made up my mind right then and there. "But nothing more than friends."

"I'm not an idiot." The crease of Yesenia's eyebrows deepened. "You looked like you were about to kiss when we found you both yesterday—"

"But we didn't—"

"But you would have if we didn't show up." She glared. "Am I right, Filia?"

"I wouldn't have let him." But I let him last night.

Why am I like this?

"Why?" Her entire look hardened. "You know what our lot is in life, Filia. Don't make things harder for you, me, or him."

"I know—"

"Do you?" She placed her hands on her hips. "I know it's hard—I'm a princess too. But I will do my duty, and I will be true to it."

"I understand and I completely agree—"

"Then *stay away from him.*" Yesenia's words came out slow, her fists clenched. Her eyes flashed up to the guard standing at the edge of the orchard row, and her lower lip quivered as she stepped back. "Forgive me, Filia."

"No, forgive me." I stepped forward, wishing I could undo the past, and undo kissing Dawson. "I'm so, *so* sorry Yesenia. You have my word. I'll stay away from him. The Fall Festival is nearly over and I'm even sailing away in two day's time."

“I know.” She turned, so her back faced me. I gave her a moment to recompose herself as I searched for what I could say. But I had nothing to say because I was completely guilty. I kissed her fiance when I knew I shouldn’t have. She was right. I had made things harder for her. For me. For everyone.

This is the way of being a princess. I had known my entire life, so why did I think I was so “special?” My mind went to the Pirate Wars, when I dressed up as a soldier. Even then I thought I was doing the right thing… But now I could barely walk. At the current moment, my legs hurt so badly that I just wanted to sit on the dewy grass and give my legs and feet a rest.

I’m not special. And listening to my heart had only brought me grief. It brought others grief too. Yesenia shouldn’t have to deal with a fiance who was in love with another woman. The thought that I caused Yesenia and her future marriage grief was torture.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be so harsh,” Yesenia said, turning around again. Her red cheeks and glossy eyes meant tears had fallen, but she had wiped them away.

I wished the earth would swallow me. I was the worst human in all the Incandescent Kingdoms. Yesenia didn’t deserve to feel so horrible about herself, or the fact that she had competition for her own fiance.

“Yesenia, you have nothing to apologize for. I’m so sorry.” But no amount of apologies would make up for the damage already done. I had to show her.

“We’re princesses.” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat, lifting her chin to dispel her emotions. “We both know what’s expected of us.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry if I’ve made things more complicated.”

“We can only move forward from here.” She didn’t want to talk about anything, or how I messed up so badly, which was gracious of her. It was very princess-like.

“Your highness, may I be of assistance?” The guard had started to approach, but Yesenia quickly waved him away.

“I’m fine, Santiago. Please give us some privacy.”

“Yes, milady.” He bowed and returned to giving us some space. She watched him walk away, her eyes glistening, then she turned to me.

“I cannot have another betrothal fall through.” She smoothed out her dress, though her fingers shook. I just wanted to hug her. My heart hurt so

bad… from everything. I couldn't even imagine what she felt now. "If I'm to be an honor to my family, I will marry Dawson," she finished.

"And if I'm to be an honor to my family, I will marry Tevita," I said. A silent understanding pulsed between both of us, a sort of princess code that could only happen between two royal princesses and their royal obligations: We knew what we had to do, even if we didn't want to do it.

"If my betrothal to Dawson falls through…" Yesenia shuddered, and the lump in my throat seemed to grow as big as the largest apple in my basket. "My father will be so displeased."

"I understand." I did.

"Am I so despicable that no man wants me?" she asked no one in particular, looking at the amber-covered mountains in the distance.

"It's not like that at all, Yesenia. You're beautiful, bright, proper—"

"Then why am I not married? Why has one of my betrothals already been broken off?" She didn't look at me, but said, "And it seems my betrothal to Dawson hangs by a thread."

"It won't from here on, I assure you."

"It's not your fault Filia. It's me."

"It's not you." I stepped forward and took her arms, turning her to face me. "Yesenia, it's not you. It's me—I have let my emotions get in the way." My eyebrows shot up in remorse. "And we both know better than to let emotions get in the way."

The unspoken princess code, yet again. All princesses knew they couldn't feel too much. They couldn't get too excited about anything, because their lives were dictated by others.

Yesenia nodded but her face was vacant from any emotions. She looked almost… numb. "Then why am I so disgusted by myself, Filia?"

I was disgusted with myself for causing this innocent princess to think so low of herself. One of her betrothals had been broken off, so how could Yesenia *not* feel bad about herself? She probably thought nobody wanted her.

"Yesenia, you *will* marry Dawson. You are a true princess, as am I."

My mind caught a whiff of my earlier commitments, the ones I made when I first arrived in Alpenglow Kingdom: *No more risks.* My life had been laid out for me, and that plan worked, so I needed to obey orders.

Yesenia wiped her eyes again then motioned to her guard. "If you'll excuse me, Filia." We curtsied to each other then I watched as her guard

escorted her away, leaving me alone in the row of the apple orchard. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the apple trees, carrying with it a sweet scent. There was a whiff of something else too, something rotten. I looked at the ground, littered with spoiled, fallen apples.

I was like those rotten apples. I had ruined the delicate balance of royal life by letting my emotions win the previous night. Everything would have been sweet and fine if I had just continued to play my role as the perfect princess.

CHAPTER 13

I managed to avoid Dawson for most of the day, but when it came time to try out the corn maze, he stepped next to me.

"Hey beautiful," he said softly, so nobody else could hear. I blushed and looked away. Aunty Taimane was somewhere nearby, and Yesenia would be here any minute. He gently touched my back. "Everything alright?"

I shook my head, wishing to just disappear from this whole situation. My cheeks felt hot anytime I saw Dawson, made eye contact, or someone made mention of him. Guilt filled my entire being. How could I ever make things right?

People lined up to enter the corn maze—it was a race to get to the tower at the end of the maze, after all. Yesenia stood to the side of the group, watching everyone with distrust. She was probably smart to stick to the side, because people looked very serious about winning the race. I heard people got trampled in these sorts of things. Mallory and Vance had their game faces on in the throng of people.

The king of Alpenglow Kingdom called out in a booming voice, "On your mark. Get set. GO!" Everyone ran so quickly, the commotion was overwhelming. For a moment, it reminded me of soldiers panicking during the wars, and I felt worried and hot and not just from Dawson grabbing my hand to join the fray.

We followed the maze, the green stalks so tall around us that they seemed to stretch high into the sky. My legs ached as I hobbled to keep pace with Dawson. We turned left. Right. Left. Right. So many turns… Then Dawson veered into the thick corn stalks and pulled me close, kissing me.

"Dawson…" I pulled away but he continued to press soft kisses on my cheek, my jawline, down to my neck. My body was on fire even though it was a crisp autumn evening. I pushed him away. "Dawson."

His breaths came out heavy as our foreheads touched. "I love you, Filia."

I swallowed hard and nodded: his feelings were quite apparent. "I love you too, Dawson."

"Then marry me."

"I can't." I thought of how terrible this was, that we left the corn maze to have a hidden, secret moment in the thick fields.

I can't do this to Yesenia, to my people, to my family… I stepped away. "We shouldn't be doing this, Dawson."

"We can make it work."

"We can't." I rubbed my forehead, my skin still tingling from his kisses. "If anyone were to find out what I did, I'd be punished." I looked at him. "You can't marry someone who has been dishonored by her people."

"You don't know that." Dawson rubbed my arm. "Iosefa will forgive you, I'm sure of it. Besides, you saved my life. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Of course." I didn't want him to think that his life was worthless. It had been a good thing I was there, else Dawson might not be standing before me. I sighed. "But I disobeyed my father's orders. Women are not allowed to go to war."

"We can't change the past. But we can choose what to do going forward."

"Dawson, I just can't do it. I can't do this to Yesenia." I squeezed my eyes shut. "Or my sisters, my family, my people." I couldn't believe I was saying the words, but they came out anyway. "Dawson, will you keep my secret?"

"That you fought in the Pirate Wars?" He made it look like I was hiding a murder or something. "Why?"

“Because our kingdoms depend on it. I am supposed to marry Tevita as a favor to my family and my people. You’re supposed to marry Yesenia to show the alliance between Alpenglow Kingdom and Fireblaze Kingdom.” I just wanted to cry. “Please don’t make this harder, Dawson. We shouldn’t have kissed last night. We shouldn’t have done *anything* together.”

Dawson held my arms, his green eyes a darker emerald in the evening light. After a long stretch of silence, he tucked a loose piece of hair behind my ear.

So much for convincing him to stay away.

“I can’t go back,” he said.

I knew what he meant: he couldn’t go back to us being just friends, just royal acquaintances.

“You have to.”

“I choose you, Filia.”

How could I *ever* make things the way they were before I fell prey to my emotions? Because, at the moment, I was still crazy in love with Dawson. It took all my self-control to not wrap my arms around him and let us just hold each other.

“If you didn’t have this secret to bear, would you marry me?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Then let’s bear it together. I’ll go with you to tell my father.”

“No, I can’t do that.”

“Then you’re going to hide it forever?”

“Yes, and I will do what’s been expected of me my whole life.”

“Filia.” This time Dawson took my shoulders, rubbing them up and down. “You were brave enough to fight in the Pirate Wars. Can you be brave enough to fight for us—for me and you?”

I shook my head, shrugging his hands off and stepping back. This conversation was not going how I planned it. Ever since talking with Yesenia that morning, I had recited all the things I was going to tell Dawson. And it always ended with me telling him that I couldn’t take any more risks. The last time I did, I almost died. My legs and feet were deformed because of my last risk. I would be a dishonor to my family and kingdom if people found out about my past.

But for all the recitations I made up in my head earlier about rejecting Dawson, I had to search for words.

“Dawson, I can’t do it anymore.” My voice was barely a whisper. “I can’t disobey orders anymore.” Shaking my head, I added, “That’s not what princesses do.”

“Filia, wait.” He walked after me, but I stepped back into the maze, not knowing where to go but getting as far from the prince as possible. With so many people going through the maze—including families, couples, and friends—Dawson stopped, and I looked back to find him staring after me. He ran his fingers through his hair and turned around, his shoulders sinking.

Why have I done this to Dawson? Why?

Other people ran past me, including many couples, their hands clasped tightly together.

That will never be me. My whole body went numb as I limped out of the maze. It took forever, because I kept turning corners, only to find dead ends. Some teenagers kindly let me tag along as they found the way out, but each step was like walking on glass.

I can’t do this. I loved Dawson so, *so* much… but I had done something wrong in my past, and I couldn’t bear to do anything wrong yet again.

By the time I got to the castle, it was dark. As I collapsed on my bed, my eyes wandered to the bright harvest moon shining through the window, pouring light onto the bedroom floor.

A few tears escaped, but I reminded myself of what I knew to be true: *I can’t take risks. They’re too dangerous.* I needed to obey orders and do what a perfect princess would do. I’d been trained for it my entire life. But, even though I told myself it was the right thing to do, my heart still ached and I fell into a lonely, sad sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Much to my surprise, Aunty Taimane didn't knock on my door the following morning. I fully expected to hear her banging on it, but the room remained quiet. A few orange and red leaves brushed against the window panes, making light scratching noises, but it was still very peaceful.

I stared at the stone ceiling, wishing I could just go home already.

We're setting sail tomorrow. And then I could put this entire thing behind me. I could even toss my diary into the sea. I glanced at my nightstand, where my diary sat.

I bolted upright.

Where's my diary?

When I stood, pain shot up my legs, but I didn't have any time to waste.

Did it fall on the ground? I searched around the nightstand and stripped the bed sheets closest to the nightstand. I checked my pockets, then ran into the closet and checked the pockets of my other dresses. They all turned up empty.

Where is it? Panic panged my chest. Did I take it with me to go apple picking? To the corn maze?

I left it… The more I thought about it, the more sure I was. I had left it sitting on the nightstand to dry.

Someone took it. My blood went cold. I knew one person who was very, *very* interested in the diary.

And she hasn't visited me this morning.

I dressed in haste, then opened the door and bumped right into Dawson.

"Oof!" I collided into his hard chest, and he caught me.

"What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?" I asked, sucking in a breath. "I thought I made it clear yesterday that—"

He kissed me. Right there. In the hallway.

I pulled away, looking around with my anxiety shooting sky-high. "Dawson!" My cheeks reddened but Dawson didn't care. He stroked my hair.

"Can we talk, please?"

"I don't have time."

"Where are you off to?"

"To find my aunt." I brushed past him, and he followed.

"Why?"

I whirled around. Did I dare tell Dawson? I couldn't confirm that Aunty Taimane had my diary, but I was pretty sure. Who else would have stolen it? "My diary is missing."

"She stole it?" He looked absolutely crossed. "That's a violation of personal privacy."

"My diary talks about everything…." I gave him a look. "Everything."

He didn't seem bothered. Instead, he winked. "Oh you mean everything that happened the other night?"

I rolled my eyes and stormed away. Dawson was no help. Perhaps Aunty Taimane was right about him. He was childish. Didn't take anything seriously.

He used to take things seriously…. During the Pirate Wars, he was always so somber.

But he's at peace now. How could he be at peace? Did he not have a conscience? If I were in his shoes, I'd feel guilty for being betrothed to Yesenia while kissing another girl.

Dawson caught up to me. "Where do you think she is?"

I had no idea. Because now that I thought about it, Aunty Taimane hardly joined in any of the Fall Festival activities. So what *did* she do?

"I think we should talk to my father today," Dawson said. "Together."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's ask my father for permission and blessing on our marriage."

“Dawson.” I stopped, my heart aching. “Why are you so set on this idea? Why can’t you let it go?”

Dawson reached for my hand and squeezed it. “Because I love you.”

If only he knew how much I’ve lied, how risky my secrets were…

“There are many fish in the sea,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“But I know which *fish* I want.” He wrapped his arms around me again.

Oh no. I should’ve stepped out of his embrace, but I melted into him instead.

“Dawson, we’re in the middle of a hallway. Someone is going to see us.”

“You’re right.” He pulled me behind one of the large tapestries and kissed me.

Enough is enough. I had to make a decision. Now or never. Was I going to keep doing this thing with Dawson in secret? Or would I confess that I truly loved him and that I would take a risk to be together?

I rested my head on his chest, wishing things weren’t so complicated.

It doesn’t have to be complicated. Dawson was right. We could just go talk to his father, and figure out how to break both betrothals so Dawson and I could be together. We didn’t even have to bring up the whole thing about me fighting in the Pirate Wars. That could stay a secret between Dawson and me.

“Alright, fine,” I said, calming down a bit. “Let’s try talking to your father.”

Dawson’s smile said it all. My heart skipped a beat.

What if things did work out? What if the king approves of our union and helps undo the arranged marriages? Then I could be with Dawson… forever.

I can do this, I told myself. Yes, it was a risk. But yes, it would be worth it… right? I bit my lower lip, still not convinced but hoping for the best.

MY FEET ACHED WALKING on the stone floors of the castle, but as we passed the throne room, my hair stood on end. I could just *feel* that Aunty Taimane was inside.

“She’s in there.” I stared at the two grand doors.

“Well let’s go in.”

“Wait.” I grabbed Dawson’s arm. “Don’t say a word… please?”

“About what?”

“About my…” I gave him a look. *My secret.* He nodded and knocked. My heart pounded in my ears. What was going to happen?

Two guards stood at the entrance, and when they opened the doors, I saw the back of Aunty Taimane’s hair. My stomach twisted in a thousand knots as I thought about my missing diary. Did she take it? Had I jumped to conclusions?

Maybe I truly misplaced it…

“Dawson, Filia. Please come in.” The King of Alpenglow stood and beckoned for us to enter. His voice was somber, his expression grave. Aunty Taimane turned and when our eyes met, she smiled. It wasn’t a kind smile, but a wicked smile that said she knew something I didn’t.

We walked in, and my feet felt like lead. Each step was heavy with guilt, shame, anxiety. And I didn’t know why I felt that way until I saw my diary. It was sitting on the armrest of the king’s throne.

Blood left my face as a million questions rushed through my head:

How did the king get that?

Did he read it?

What does he know?

Why is Aunty Taimane smiling?

“Princess Filia.” The king sounded like he was trying to withhold a scolding tone. But he was a father, and it came out that way anyway.

I swallowed hard, and Dawson reached for my hand, squeezing it. It was a sweet gesture, but one that wouldn’t get us out of this mess—this mess that I created.

“Your aunt here has told me that you disobeyed the laws of Sunrise Kingdom.”

Now I truly felt like a child being scolded, like I secretly took a cookie out of a jar and a parent confronted me about it.

His eyebrows creased as he leaned forward. “She said you dressed as a soldier and boarded Captain Dawson’s ship.” He motioned to Dawson. “While it does concern me that you broke the laws of your people, I’m more concerned about your behavior.” At this, he turned to his son. “Did you know she was on your ship?”

He shook his head. Before he could speak, the king continued. “Your aunt also told me that you intended on keeping this a secret. It would be a dishonor to the royal family of Sunrise Kingdom, and also to the man you’re betrothed to.” At that, he gave a hard look at mine and Dawson’s

interlaced fingers. While I moved to withdraw my hand, Dawson held it tighter.

Aunty Taimane continued to stand on the side, a smug look on her face.

“This is why your feet and legs are not able to function properly, is this true Filia?”

It felt like someone lunged at my throat with their hands, wringing it, making me unable to answer. Fear surrounded and engulfed me, like I was drowning in it.

What do I do?

I looked at Aunty Taimane, hating the way the corners of her lips turned upward. She looked like a cat, ready to pounce on her prey.

I hate her. I had never felt such loathing in my body as I did towards her at that moment. She treated me poorly, disrespected me, bossed me around, and majorly crossed boundaries by stealing my diary!

I could never call her family. I didn’t need a mother-in-law like her. I didn’t need her in my life, period. I’d been patient and gracious about my betrothal and towards her all this time, while she showed me nothing but impatience and disgust.

“Where did she get that information?” I asked, not answering the king’s question right away. He held up the diary.

“I haven’t confirmed the contents of this—I don’t know if I want to,” he said. “But this is your diary, correct?”

“Yes. But she’s lying.” The words came out of their own accord, and even Dawson looked at me.

I’m lying. I pulled my hand away from Dawson’s, my fear and anxiety taking over.

I must be a good princess. If anyone found out the truth, I’d be demoted. My family will see me as a dishonor.

A memory tugged at me, one in which my father and mother sat me down, telling me what an honor it was for me to be the oldest princess in the family.

“You must set the example for your sisters,” my father said. “They aren’t disciplined and will not attend princess training like yourself, so you must be the perfect example.”

I was only eight years old, but that moment felt like yesterday.

You must be the perfect example. And I tried. When my sisters played games, ran, and behaved as typical children would, I stood off to the side. I

ached to join, but knew I couldn't. Princesses didn't tumble and throw sand and have fun.

And that is how it went my whole life.

Until now… I had ruined my perfect image, even if nobody except Dawson and I knew.

And, somehow, a soiled reputation felt worse than losing Dawson. My whole life I was seen as perfect by my parents, siblings, friends, and kingdom. I couldn't lose that. I couldn't lose my reputation, or I'd be a poor example to my sisters and a dishonor to my kingdom. I dug my hand into my pocket, feeling the locket of my sisters' hair.

I can't let them down. I had let them down once already by dressing as a soldier and fighting in the wars, but I would not do it again. I had taken too many risks, and this time, I had to uphold my image.

Even if it means lying to Dawson too?

"I cut my foot on the reef while swimming," I said.

"You're going to lie about this?" Even Aunty Taimane looked as shocked as Dawson. The king believed me easily—as he should have. I was the princess, and Aunty Taimane was just the mother of a local chief at Sunrise Kingdom.

"Filia," Dawson started to say, but I stepped forward, as if to ask the king permission for the diary. He nodded, and I took it, trying to keep my fingers from shaking.

"I didn't fight in the Pirate Wars."

"Then what's in the diary?"

"It's just a personal diary," I said, hoping he wouldn't ask to look at it. He didn't, but gently stood and pushed the diary in my hands towards me.

"Take it." He turned to Aunty Taimane. "Why would you try to frame the princess?"

"Filia—" Dawson started to say again, but I avoided eye contact, instead, turning my attention to Aunty Taimane.

She was speechless. "Your majesty, I didn't lie. She's lying. She dressed as a soldier, went to war, and was in love with your son for years. She broke the laws of Sunrise Kingdom. She is a disgrace and should be punished for disobeying her father's orders—"

"That's enough." The king looked absolutely disgusted. And I felt disgusted with myself. He waved his hand to his guards. "Take her away."

“She’s lying!” The woman’s voice rose to a shout. “Filia tell him the truth *this instant!*”

I stared at her, my expression cold and distant.

This is for my sisters.…

“Filia!” The guards took her arms before she lunged at me. She kicked and screamed. “She’s lying, your majesty! She just wants to marry your son but she would be a complete dishonor! She should be punished! *Filia!*”

Dawson stood there, in total shock, while I turned to the king. He rubbed his forehead, and once the doors shut, leaving us in an eerie silence, he looked at me. “I’m sorry she accused you of such things,” he said. “She would’ve made a mean mother-in-law anyways.” He winked, trying to change the mood, but guilt filled my stomach.

I lied. I lied to the king. I lied about Aunty Taimane. And now she would be punished, instead of me.

But my reputation.…

“Did you both come in here to speak to me about something?” The king smiled, but Dawson stood there, motionless, and I did too.

I shook my head. Why would Dawson want me now? I just lied about my aunt and now she was in prison. “We were going to ask a question but, I think things are different now.”

I curtsied, still avoiding eye contact with Dawson. “If you’ll excuse me, your majesty.” I had to get out of there. Sweat made my hands clammy. Though the throne room was spacious, it suddenly felt claustrophobic.

I’m the worst person ever.… But what choice did I have? I didn’t want anyone to find out my secret, and all had been well… until Dawson found out, and until Aunty Taimane stole my diary. Now Dawson probably viewed me as a horrible person *and* a liar, and Aunty Taimane was going to be punished for telling the truth.

I need to get out of here. I wanted to sort through my thoughts and convince myself I did the right thing. The king excused me and I practically sprinted out. Dawson was going to follow, but his father stopped him.

As I ran outside to the courtyard and sat on a bench, I buried my head in my hands.

Aunty Taimane is in prison because of me. I went through the list of royal laws and recalled that lying to royalty could be subject to the penalty of death.

Is she going to get killed for lying… when she didn't really lie? Was I truly going to let this happen? I pulled the locket and diary out of my pocket.

On one hand was the diary, the truth. On the other hand was the locket, upholding my "perfect" princess image to bring honor to my family.

But was it honorable to lie? A tear escaped me as I looked up at the golden fields and auburn mountains.

What have I done?

CHAPTER 15

I wandered to the lake outside the castle. I'd seen this lake many times during my stay, but up close it was quite beautiful. The setting sun lit up the sky, and a row of autumn trees reflected on the water. The chilly air made me wish I'd grabbed a cloak before coming out here.

Though I wanted to stroll around the lake, my feet hurt and I sat on the ground, pulling my knees to my chest. As I shivered, I buried my head in my knees, wishing to just disappear.

What do I do?

I had lied, and all because I wanted to save my reputation. I had to be the perfect princess because that's how others saw me… always. If I wasn't the perfect princess, I would let my whole family down.

A memory resurfaced, one in which my younger sister, Heilani, was throwing a tantrum. She was ten years old, and I was twelve. It was in the middle of a banquet, and nobody knew what set her off but she went crying to our mother. While Heilani did look like a spoiled brat, a behavior that princesses would *not* engage in, it was my mother's look that remained with me.

Mother's eyebrows creased and she grabbed Heilani's arm. Her grasp was so strong, Heilani's brown wrist turned white.

I didn't hear what mother said, but she dragged Heilani out of the banquet by the arm. She was furious, and when she returned minutes later,

with Heilani wiping her tears, she apologized to all those around her for Heilani, her “temperamental” daughter.

Then mother must’ve felt me watching, because she looked right in my direction with a gaze that said: *You better not behave like that.* And I didn’t. I couldn’t. Not only was it embarrassing for my mother, but it would be embarrassing for me and for the kingdom.

At least mother made it seem like Heilani was an embarrassment to Sunrise Kingdom.

I sighed.

So I couldn’t even imagine how my mother would react if she found out about this.

And I especially couldn’t imagine the bad example I’d set for my sisters if I told the truth.

I took a stupid risk… Fighting in the Pirate Wars was the worst thing I could’ve done.

But I saved Dawson’s life… Wasn’t that worth something?

Of course it is! I loved Dawson.

But not enough to tell the truth. Not enough to be who I truly am. Before I could explore the thought of asking who I was, footsteps crunched on dry leaves behind me.

Dawson approached and placed his cloak around my shoulders. He sat next to me and said nothing. For a long moment we sat in silence, watching the fall leaves floating on the lake.

“Are you really going to hide the truth?” the prince asked after a while.

I swallowed hard and wrapped his black cloak tighter around me.

“Your aunt will be punished for doing nothing wrong.”

“I know.”

He gave me a look. “So you’re just going to let that happen?”

I avoided eye contact, but I could feel Dawson’s disappointment. “If you don’t say something, I will.”

“I know you will.” I glanced at him. “And once you do, there will be no way we could be together. When I return to Sunrise Kingdom, I’ll be punished for breaking the law.”

The conflict on his face said it all. What was the right thing to do? Should we allow Aunty Taimane to be punished so that my secret was safe, and we could be together? Just thinking of that option filled me with deep guilt.

Or… should we tell the truth, and come to terms with parting ways?

Dawson took a deep, slow breath then scooted closer to me and put his arm around my shoulders. I shook my head, starting to shrug him off when he said, “I don’t come to this lake anymore.”

The water mirrored the colors of the painted sky: golden, orange, and pink. That, combined with the leaves and autumn tree reflections, was magical. Yet even with the beautiful scenery, nothing could dispel the gloom hanging over us.

“Why not?”

“My little sister drowned in this lake.” He bit his lower lip and ran his fingers through his dark hair. “It was during the Fall Festival too.”

I looked at him, not expecting such a sad history of this lake. “I’m so sorry.”

“She was eight years old.”

I couldn’t help but place my hand on his arm. I knew that the youngest daughter of Alpenglow Kingdom had passed away years ago, but I didn’t know how.

“We used to go swimming here all the time.” He shook his head. “After that happened, we stopped coming here.”

“I don’t blame you. I can’t imagine losing my sisters.” I squeezed his arm, then clasped my hands around my knees again.

“Every year when the Fall Festival comes around, I try to be happy. But…” He sighed. “I can’t help but mourn. My mother died during the Fall Festival too.”

“Really?” Two losses during the autumn season? That did sound very difficult!

“She had the Crimson Cough, but said she’d feel better if she got some fresh air.” Dawson pointed to the apple orchards in the distance. “We found her body there, in the orchards. She was fatigued, and it was probably too cold for her.”

My heart ached for Dawson. “The Fall Festival has always been hard for me. But this year has been different.” He met my eyes. “Because of you, Filia.” His words warmed me from the inside out. “Autumn, to me, has always been about loss. Instead of enjoying the beauty, all I used to think about was that everything was falling. Everything is dying in autumn. The leaves fall and the trees turn empty and bare. It’s the season introducing us to the cold winter months. But when you came, it was like seeing autumn

for the first time, and it's beautiful. Perhaps autumn isn't about death, but more about letting things go."

At this, Dawson stroked my cheek. "I don't want to lose you, Filia. I've lost so much in my life. I don't want to lose you too."

A tear escaped. I didn't want to lose Dawson either. His words were so sweet, calming the anxiety in my chest, if only for a moment.

"But I also want to do the right thing," he said.

"I know. I do too." I looked away. "We have to part here." My words must have surprised Dawson, because his hand dropped.

"That's not what I meant."

"Dawson, you *have* to marry Yesenia. And I'll return to Sunrise Kingdom with Aunty Taimane and figure out how to free her from punishment there."

"You mean…" Dawson leaned his elbow on one knee. "You're not going to tell my father that you fought in the Pirate Wars?"

"A secret is a secret." I pulled out my diary, then did something I knew I shouldn't have done. I tossed it in the lake, and the splash seemed to echo for miles. "Aunty Taimane had no right reading my diary, but now nobody will know. I'll think of something to pardon Aunty Taimane by the time I get back to Sunrise Kingdom. I'll follow through with my betrothal."

"Filia…" Dawson was so shocked, he was speechless again.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't risk my reputation. I care too much about my sisters, my family, my kingdom. I don't want to dishonor them."

"But isn't telling the truth the most honorable thing to do?" Dawson took my hands. "If you really cared about those you love, you would be honest."

I avoided eye contact.

"You can't be serious, Filia. You're really going to keep your past a secret forever? Why are you trying so hard to hide it? What's done is done. Telling the truth will set you free—"

"It will put me in prison, or I will be punished. Or worse, I'll be cast out from Sunrise Kingdom."

"Who cares?" Dawson squeezed my hands. "If you're cast out of Sunrise Kingdom, come back to me. Filia, *please*. Just tell the truth, and we'll figure everything out together, alright?"

I couldn't handle this conversation anymore. I had basically ruined my life, my legs, and my feet by fighting in the Pirate Wars, and now I had to

suffer the consequences. Dawson and I could never be together. I had to stay true to my royal obligations. And, most of all, I had to keep my reputation as the perfect princess. I loved my kingdom, and I hated the thought of dishonoring it or being cast out.

“Filia…” Dawson followed me as I stomped away. He stopped and turned me so I faced him. “Are you afraid of being yourself? Are you afraid that if people know who you really are, they won’t like you—or even love you?”

I stared at my suede boots.

“Filia, I love you for who you are. I love that you were brave enough to fight in the wars.” Dawson rubbed his hands up and down my arms, and when I continued to avoid looking at him, he raised my chin. “But your past doesn’t make me love you any less now. Besides, if your family and people truly loved you—which I know they do—then they would continue to love you regardless of what’s happened. But you have to take that risk of being true, of being honest with yourself and others.”

There he was, saying all the wisdom I needed to hear, but I couldn’t get myself to do it.

I shook my head. “You don’t understand Dawson.”

“Then help me understand.” His voice was so gentle, so tender.

“I’ve ruined everything. Not only this.” I pointed to my feet. “But the possibility of us being together.”

“Filia, if you hadn’t been in the wars, I’d probably be dead.”

I still didn’t believe him, my mind stuck on the idea that this secret could never *ever* be released into the world.

“Let it rest, Dawson.” I gently pushed him away. “We can’t be together, and I’m sorry.”

“So that’s it?” Every emotion passed through his face: sadness, frustration, and the greatest disappointment. “You’re going to hide this secret, and hope that your aunt doesn’t get punished for telling the truth?”

“I don’t have a choice—”

“You always have a choice. You made a choice when you dressed as a soldier and fought in the Pirate Wars—”

“And it was a terrible choice!” I didn’t mean to raise my voice, but I was going to explode if I didn't have some time alone to sort through my confusing and conflicting emotions.

Dawson seemed to understand this then nodded, digging his hands into his pockets, and taking a step back. The step felt like he moved a mile away from me.

“I’m sorry saving me was a bad choice—”

“That’s not what I mean.” My heart dropped.

“If you weren’t there, Filia, I probably wouldn’t be here.” He shrugged. “You probably wouldn’t have the problems you have now, with these…” He motioned between himself and me. “With these feelings.” He bowed. “I’m sorry to have been a burden to you—”

“You’re not a burden—” But Dawson already turned around and walked away, his head downcast. I watched him, wanting to call after him, but also unsure of what to say. It was *not* a mistake to save him. So why was I terribly conflicted?

CHAPTER 16

I stayed by the lake, not knowing where else to go or what to do. I was at war with myself.

Should I tell the truth and let Aunty Taimane free? That was obviously the *right* thing to do, but my heart wasn't there.

Or should I, as I told Dawson, keep my secret a secret and figure out how to have Aunty Taimane pardoned when we returned to Sunrise Kingdom?

Either way, it meant I would *not* be with Dawson. If I told the truth, I would be dishonored and possibly demoted or outcast. Then the king of Alpenglow would *not* want me to marry his son.

If I didn't tell the truth, I would bear the burden of lying for the rest of my life. I would marry Tevita, as planned, and live according to the rules. I would not be a bad example to my sisters, family, and kingdom…

But lying is a bad example. Even if they didn't know it.

I sat at the banks of the lake again, picking up fallen leaves.

Everything dies in autumn, Dawson had said earlier. The red maple and yellow aspen leaves in my hand were such a striking color, it was hard to believe that these were dying. I loved it here, and I loved this season. Dawson's words continued to replay in my mind: *Perhaps autumn isn't about death, but more about letting things go.*

I shook my head. I couldn't let go of this image everyone had of me: the perfect princess. Ever since I was little, my parents ensured I had the best

tutors and princess trainers. They expected me to be a good princess and to honor our family, ancestors, and Sunrise Kingdom.

But what about who I really am? Deep inside I longed to follow my heart, and I did that during the Pirate Wars. It had scared me to the core, but I knew I was doing the right thing. I fought, learned new skills, and saved lives.

I saved Dawson's life. If I hadn't been there, would he be alive now?

I love him so much. But if I truly loved him, would I risk listening to my heart and being my true self? Could I risk telling the truth and letting the world know my secret, that I loved him?

I scooted to the edge of the water and placed the leaves inside, one by one. Then I watched as they floated away.

Autumn is about letting go. Letting my fears fall away. I swallowed hard, listening to my heart for the first time in, what felt like, ages.

My heartbeat sounded in my ears, and something new entered as I listened. My heart felt at peace as the crisp fall breeze blew through my hair.

I love Dawson. That was the truth. *And I want to honor him, my family, and my people.* I didn't want to just be a perfect princess. I wanted to be an honorable princess. But if I was to be an honorable princess, not just a "perfect" princess, I had to tell the truth.

Though it would be a bad example to my sisters, especially my two youngest twin sisters, I had to risk it.

I don't want to be afraid anymore. I looked at my suede boots, covering the deformity of my legs and feet. I, like Dawson, had lost much in my life, but this loss had only made me stronger. It made me more compassionate, determined, and resilient. When I lost the ability to stand on my feet and legs for long periods of time, I rode a horse around the entire Kingdom of Sunrise to learn natural remedies and medicines from the *kupuna*, the old folks.

As a nurse, I was able to help people and bring hope and light back to them, despite their injuries and wounds. I had also watched as many men lost their lives. It was hard to endure, but I kept doing it because I hoped I could make a difference.

Hope. I looked around at the autumn bliss: the multicolored trees, ruby and amber leaves, and sparkling blue lake. Though things were dying in autumn, there was something so beautiful about death and letting go.

Hope. That's what got me through all those hard times of loss and fear, and I hadn't even realized it. There was hope, even amidst sadness, fear, anxiety, loss, and grief.

I looked up at the evening sky, fear still making my stomach knot, but a new feeling entering my entire being: hope. I would be an honorable princess, tell the truth, and suffer the consequences. Yet no matter what happened, I could keep hoping. And that was a risk definitely worth taking.

I HURRIED BACK to the castle, no questions in my mind about the path ahead. Yet, my heart ached for support. I had no idea where Dawson would've gone, so I went to the next person I knew who would understand my situation and wholeheartedly support me.

After knocking on the door, I stood back, wringing my hands together, checking the halls, wondering if I'd see Dawson.

The door was opened by Santiago, Yesenia's guard. He bowed. "Milady, may I help you?"

"Is Yesenia there?" I asked, my voice pressed with concern.

"She is. Can I deliver a message?"

"Is that Filia?" The princess's voice came from within.

"Yes," I called in. "Yesenia I need your help." Santiago opened the door, revealing Yesenia on a cushioned seat in front of a vanity, her handmaiden braiding the princess's dark hair.

"Is everything alright?" Yesenia beckoned for me to enter. For all the tension in our conversation earlier, things seemed clearer between us. I hobbled in and knelt next to her.

"Filia, what are you doing?"

"I'm so sorry, Yesenia." I took her hands. "I'm truly sorry for making things complicated between you and Dawson." I blushed. "But I love him."

"I know." She pursed her lips and patted my hands, then turned to her vanity, looking at herself in the mirror. "Are you going to ask me to request a cancellation of the betrothal?"

"No. I need your help to speak with the king."

"You're shaking." She took my shoulders and stood us both up.

"Yesenia, I have to tell the king the truth."

"That you love his son?"

"Yes, and that I dressed as a soldier and fought in the Pirate Wars." Both Yesenia and her handmaiden gasped.

“You *what?”* Yesenia’s jaw was still dropped.

“I disobeyed the law, and I’ve kept it a secret but I must tell the king the truth or Aunty Taimane will be punished. She’s in prison now.”

“Hang on. Start from the beginning. Why is your aunt in prison? And *how* did you keep such a secret?” She seemed both confused and intrigued. As I helped Yesenia’s handmaiden dress the princess into her evening attire, I explained the whole thing: how Aunty Taimane found my diary, why I needed to tell the truth, and the support I needed as I listened to the consequences of my actions.

“Of course Filia. I’ll come with you,” she said when I finished the whole story. I was out of breath and my head reeled from anxiety, but I continued to remind myself why I wanted to do this: for Dawson, for my family, my kingdom, for my honor, and because I believed in hope.

We went to the throne room, and Yesenia let me hold her arm for support. As we walked, she reassured me that things would work out. “Surely when you return to Sunrise Kingdom, your brother will show mercy. He’s your brother, and you were doing the right thing.”

I nodded. I had listened to my heart when I chose to fight in the Pirate Wars, and I was listening to my heart now.

When we reached the throne room, the guards opened the doors to reveal the king of Alpenglow, Dawson’s father, reading something.

“Ah, come in princesses.” He smiled at us both, but my face drained of any color. “Are you ill, Filia? Should I call for the doctor?”

“No thank you.” I hurried to explain my plight before I threw up from the anxiety in my stomach. This was the right thing, but it didn’t mean it was easy. “I have to tell you the truth,” I said. “I lied to you earlier, your majesty, and I’m sorry. I had dressed as a soldier and fought in the Pirate Wars. My aunt told the truth.”

For a moment, he looked shocked, but then his eyebrows creased in disappointment. “Your aunt is in prison. You know this.”

“Yes, sir, I do. And I’m truly sorry.”

Yesenia squeezed my arm, and the support gave me strength. “I am willing to pay the consequences for my actions. I know that lying to royalty has a strict punishment. And I am ready to pay for that, as well as return home to Sunrise Kingdom and pay for disobeying the law.”

The king leaned forward and sighed as he studied me, then Yesenia. She nudged me, and I realized I had to keep telling the truth. “I’m also in love

with Dawson," I said, feeling like I might cry now. I loved him so *so* much. I loved him for as long as I could remember, and saying the words aloud was both freeing and terrifying. "He and I wanted to speak to you earlier, about helping us to wed but…" My voice choked in my throat and I swallowed hard before continuing. "But I lied, and because of that—as well as breaking the law of Sunrise Kingdom—I know a union between us is impossible."

"But I am willing to cancel my betrothal," Yesenia cut in.

The king remained silent, stroking his white beard, then he tapped his fingers on the armrest of his chair, thinking. After what felt like years, he stood and approached us. "Princesses, your bravery is admirable."

"Thank you, your majesty." Yesenia spoke for us both.

He folded his arms and paced. "But I must honor the laws of our people, and of your people, Filia."

"I understand, sir." I bit my lower lip so hard, it hurt.

"A union between you and Dawson does not sound possible," he said, then rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry, princess."

Yesenia squeezed my arm again but the tears still fell from my eyes. I wiped them in haste and nodded. I had to pay the price for my actions, and it was so unfortunate that, in the end, the price was this high.

But I listened to my heart. I did, and despite being told no by the king, there was still the tiniest sliver of hope. What if I was an outcast from Sunrise Kingdom, and I came back? What if the king pardoned me for my sins of lying earlier? And what if it made marriage to Dawson possible? I was at a loss at the moment, but I didn't want to close off the possibility of our union too soon. I loved Dawson too much to give up.

"When you return to Sunrise Kingdom," he said. "You will suffer the consequences of breaking the law. If your brother, the king, pardons you, then perhaps I may reconsider a marriage between you and my son." The king held up his finger. "But you must also make things right here. You lied to me."

"I'm so sorry." I stared at my boots. "Truly. If you'll allow me, I would like to go to the prison now and apologize to my aunt." I hastily added, "And release her."

The king nodded. "Yes. Do that first. In the meantime, I am going to speak to my son."

Yesenia and I curtsied, knowing we were excused. When the doors of the throne room closed behind us, I broke into tears. Yesenia hugged me.

"It's going to be alright, Filia."

"I can't be with Dawson." It was all I wanted.

"Shh. Take care of your aunt, and then we'll figure out the rest, alright?" She held my shoulders, but her face seemed unusually pale. Her guard was there in a moment, his hand around her waist, and she leaned on him for support.

"Are you alright?" I asked, but I could guess one of her headaches was coming on.

"The lights in the throne room were unusually bright," she said, rubbing her forehead. She tried to stand, but ended up resting her head on Santiago's chest. "I'm so sorry, Filia. Will you be alright going to your aunt's alone?"

"Yes." I took her hands, gratitude welling inside of me. "Thank you for coming with me, Yesenia." She squeezed my hands.

"Good luck." I watched as Santiago scooped the princess into his arms, as though she was light as a feather, then carried her down the hallway to her room.

I stood outside the throne room for a long moment, wiping my tears.

I have to do this. Though I didn't have Yesenia to lean on for support as I confronted Aunty Taimane, I had to keep doing the right thing. It was hard to tell the king the truth and to hear him say a marriage between Dawson and me was most likely impossible, but I did feel better. I felt… free. My secret was out, and I would keep figuring things out from here.

But first… Aunty Taimane.

CHAPTER 17

Aunty Taimane glared as I approached, the keys in my shaking hands.

"I'm so sorry," I said as I fumbled with the lock.

"Explain yourself." The door opened and Aunty Taimane stepped out, folding her arms. It was a nicer prison cell, with a bed and private area for a person to relieve him or herself. Yet it was still quite dark, and guilt weighed on me.

"I'm so sorry for lying to the king. I told him the truth, and I will pay whatever price he sets for lying to him."

"Good." She brushed past me, then turned around. "I'm canceling your betrothal to my son."

"Excuse me?" Both relief and worry filled me.

"You are a dishonor to the royal family and people of Sunrise Kingdom. I will not have him marry you. Come along. Let us make peace with one another."

I followed her, surprised at how quickly she moved to her room. "Yes, Aunty Taimane."

"Do you wish to marry the Crown Prince?" she asked, looking back at me once. Her expression looked calm, maybe even serene. Perhaps spending time in a prison cell had changed her perspective on things.

"Yes."

"What did the king say?"

The lump formed in my throat again. “He said it might not be possible.” I sighed. “Unless he pardons me.”

“And unless your brother, king of Sunrise, pardons you too.” Aunty Taimane opened the door to her bedroom and held up her hand. “Wait here, Filia.”

I did so, wondering why she wanted to even keep speaking to me. I still didn’t trust her, but, as she suggested, I did want to make peace between us.

When she came out, she put something in her pocket and motioned for us to keep walking. I didn’t know where we were going, but I knew things were still not right and we had to hash things out.

“How can I make it up to you?” I asked.

“Well,” she rolled her eyes. “At least you didn’t leave me in the cell overnight. I probably wouldn’t forgive you if I had to sleep in there.”

I shuddered, and she continued speaking. “But I do have a favor to ask.” We had reached the kitchen by then, and she asked the cook for some apple cider.

“What is the favor?” I ached to do something—anything—to make things right. Aunty Taimane took the cups and motioned for us to step into the gardens.

“I’ll tell you in a minute.” We found a bench to sit on, and she sighed. “Do you really think you could live in a place like this? Don’t the mountains ever feel claustrophobic to you?”

I shook my head, looking towards the colorful ranges. “No. I love the sea, but I love this too.”

“Here.” She handed me one of the glass cups of cider. I drank it up and made a face as the sweet taste turned tangy, then sour. “Maybe this juice is spoiled.”

Aunty Taimane drank her juice, her demeanor perfectly cool and collected. I just felt frazzled, exhausted, yet determined. I would try to make peace with Aunty Taimane, even if she still treated me unkindly.

She looked around, and, upon finding us alone, put her glass on the ground by her foot. “You will do a favor for me, Filia, and you will not be able to tell anyone.”

“I’m done with secrets,” I said as I put the glass of cider on the stone floor beneath the bench.

“But this secret you will have no problem keeping.” She grinned and it made my hair stand on end. “You just drank a potion.”

“Excuse me?” Color drained from my face as I looked at the cider. Aunty Taimane held up a small, empty vial.

“I mixed this in your drink without you knowing.”

“What is it?” My stomach started knotting all over again.

“You have been put under a curse.”

“What?” I was about to stand, panic sinking in. I’d heard before that Aunty Taimane was a witch, but I never believed any of those lies. As a nurse, and someone who used natural remedies, I didn’t believe in that sort of “magic” stuff. But the smile on her face said it was real.

“By nightfall tomorrow, you will take this knife and pierce it through the heart of the man you love.” From her pocket, she pulled a small knife. It was small enough to fit in my pocket, or in a secret pocket inside my ta’ovala. I gasped.

“No…”

“The curse will not allow you to tell anyone about it.” She stood and grabbed my hand, placing the knife in it. I tried to resist, but her grasp was strong as iron.

“I won’t do it.” But even as I said the words, my hands moved of their own accord, slipping the knife into my pocket. I fought against it, trying to throw the knife into the bushes, but it felt like the very air was working against my willpower.

“Oh, you will.” Aunty Taimane tucked a loose piece of hair from my face and I shuddered at the touch of her cold fingers. “You’re such a pretty girl. So naive. This is the strongest curse I’ve ever made. Not even your strength—or what you have left of it—will break it. Spooking the horse at the beginning of this trip didn’t work, so I had to think of another plan.”

So *she* did something to spook the horse on the very day we arrived! My head spun. What had I ever done to Aunty Taimane?

“Why?” I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Because your family has played so unfairly with me.” She patted my shoulder. “It’s only fitting I should be unfair with you.”

“What have we done to you?” I just wanted to throw up. But when I thought about doing it, hoping that a good vomit would toss this nasty cursed magic cider out of my system, my insides knotted, as if to say it was staying put. I placed my hands over my stomach.

How was I going to get out of this?

“Years ago, *my* family was supposed to ascend the throne of Sunrise Kingdom. But your great-great-grandfather stole the stone of Sunrise Kingdom and became the king. Your great-great-grandfather and my own great-grandfather were friends. They had found the stone together, but greed runs in your family. You always want what you can’t have.” Aunty Taimane smiled. “And I’m here to make things right. It’s been easy, to be honest. Your older brother will be dead by the time we return.” I gasped.

“You poisoned my brother?” *That’s* why he was so sick! I couldn’t believe it. I *knew* there was something off about his sickness, so why didn’t I realize it earlier?

She just continued to smirk. “And I’ll find a way to get rid of those pesky twins.”

Before I could speak, she held up her hand. “And don’t worry. I have plans to be rid of your newly wedded brother and his bride too.”

“Even if you did kill us all, Heilani and Jax will find out.”

“I’ll figure out how to get rid of them when that time comes.”

“You’re a witch.”

She grinned. “A *sea* witch, dear. I’m not from this mountainland, so get it straight.” I was disgusted by her.

“I’m not going to kill Dawson,” I said. “I’ll stay away from him until we leave, and then I’ll make sure you’re arrested.” But my heart ached for my older brother.

Why didn’t I stay with him? Would he really be dead by the time we returned?

“But will that lovesick prince stay away from you?” Aunty Taimane took a deep breath, the smile on her face now looking completely wicked and cruel. “When you kill that prince, you’ll be arrested and punished here. You won’t even make it home to stop what’s coming for your siblings.”

I hate her. I truly did. Aunty Taimane picked up our glasses of cider, then laughed as she walked away.

My blood ran cold. *I can’t kill Dawson.* The spell ended the following night at midnight.

I just have to stay away from him til then.

I ran to my room, locked the door, and lodged a chair to the handle to bolt it. *I’ll stay in here until tomorrow night,* I told myself. *Until this curse runs its course…*

But as I sat in the bed, knees up to my chest, I wondered if this was the one secret I'd be able to tell. I could feel the curse holding the words back in my throat, but I knew I was strong. I'd been strong earlier in telling the king the truth.

Tomorrow, I told myself. Tomorrow if I went out, I would tell Dawson about this curse and prove to my aunt that I was stronger than this. I was stronger than any curse, any secret. And I loved Dawson more than anything, so wasn't love stronger than a curse?

CHAPTER 18

I found myself at the lake the following morning. Dawson wouldn't come here, as this place reminded him of the death of his little sister. If it were me, I wouldn't come here either.

This seemed like the safest place to hide from him, though I had no doubt he'd come looking for me. Hopefully, he'd be too occupied by other things to find me though. As I walked the halls of the castle that morning, I heard the servants gossiping about me. Some of them even pointed, saying in a hushed voice, "That's her! That's the princess who dressed as a soldier and boarded the prince's ship!"

Who knew what scandalous news would abound throughout the Alpenglow Kingdom about me now? The gossip was the least of my worries, however. I paced back and forth, holding Dawson's dark cloak around me. I didn't get to return it to him the previous day, so I kept it.

Nervousness and anxiety wracked my brain, and I knew I wouldn't relax until the stroke of midnight.

"There you are!"

I jumped as the one person I tried to avoid that day ran up to me. Dawson's hands immediately went to my face, part of his fingers running through my hair. He looked concerned, but also relieved.

"You told my father the truth, Filia!" He seemed so proud, but I couldn't smile.

“Yes, and I’m going back to Sunrise Kingdom tomorrow.” My hands moved of their own accord to my pockets. I tried to fight back, but it felt like something was forcing my hands.

In one pocket was the knife, and in the other was the locket with my sisters’ hair. I started to tremble from the effort of this secret, silent battle.

“Are you alright?” He rubbed his hands up and down my arms.

“I’m terrified.” I tried to say more, to tell him about the curse, but my mouth wouldn’t move.

“We’ll get through this together. Let me come with you to Sunrise Kingdom.”

“No, no…”

“And let’s talk to my father together. You’ve apologized for lying, and your aunt is out of prison now.” I wished she wasn’t. She should’ve stayed there. If only people knew that she had poisoned Iosefa and cursed me. I tried to say this, but, apparently, she’d thought of everything with this curse. The words didn’t come.

“It’s going to be alright.” Dawson wrapped his arms around me, holding him close to me. I didn’t dare put my arms around him, afraid that my hand would clutch the knife and pierce it through his back. “Please tell me what you’re thinking, Filia.”

“I can’t.” At least I could say that.

He held me out to stare into my eyes. Why were his green eyes so vibrant? In the morning light, I could see flecks of gold around the pupil. “Can we promise not to have any more secrets?”

My head nodded on its own.

This blasted curse!

My hand clasped the knife, while the other hand clasped the locket.

“I’ll admit I started to question things,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine. “I thought I lost you, but then I realized that even if I did lose you, I would always love you. Even if we’re miles apart and you return to Sunrise Kingdom without me, I’d still love you. Even if you chose not to love me back, I’d still love you.”

My heart ached as he said these words. “I can only hope you’ll love me back, and that you’ll choose me.”

“I do choose you,” I said, meaning every word.

“I love you, Filia.” Dawson leaned in and kissed me. It was so sweet and would’ve been so perfect if not for the curse.

I love you too. But even as I thought it, my hand grasped the knife and wrapped it around his back, the blade pointing towards him.

No. NO! Every image of our time together flashed through my mind. Every special moment we shared at the Fall Festival surfaced: sitting on the bench eating cinnamon rolls, hearing Dawson talk about being at peace since the wars, seeing him work during the harvest, playing with the children, getting campfire wood together, hiking to the waterfall, kissing with hot cocoa and books in hand, picking apples, the corn maze, and so many more memories before that.

I could see Dawson as captain of his ship, his expression always serious and his skin tanned as ever. I could see Dawson in the moonlight as I held him in my arms, my legs and feet bleeding but my heart beating out of my chest, hoping he was still alive.

I saved him once.

And I'll save him again. Last time I loved him, but I didn't know it. This time I knew that I loved him, and I would do anything for him. This was a risk I would take for the rest of my life. It was scary to love, to open oneself to another. It was scary to think that we could lose each other at any moment.

But it's worth it.

My other hand grasped the golden locket.

It was as if I had the strength of my sisters, their hair in that locket. I loved my sisters and I wanted to do the right thing. The greatest honor to myself, Dawson, and my people, was to show my love for them by fighting this curse. If it meant losing myself, well then, that'd be an honorable sacrifice.

I let out a scream of pain as one of my hands clutched the locket so tightly, the corner of the heart dug into my skin. And my other hand clutched the knife, pulling it away from his back, giving the knife distance from the prince.

Dawson was so shocked as he looked from me, then to the knife in my hand. He stepped back, alarmed, while I turned and did the only thing to keep myself away from Dawson.

I jumped into the lake. Luckily we stood by a deep part of the lake, and the icy water blasted me. I didn't surface for air, but used all my willpower to swim deeper and deeper.

It was so cold, it felt like pins and needles pricking my skin until it turned into fierce pain. Mossy kelp brushed against my body, and I knew I was getting closer to the bottom of the lake. Pressure built up in my ears, and it grew darker and darker around me.

I gasped for breath and released the knife. But I held firmly onto the locket.

I love Dawson. I love my family. I love my people. And I would do this for them. I would be honorable. I was stronger than any curse, than any secret.

No… *Love* was stronger. I opened my eyes to look up at the light sparkling on the water. The leaves were silhouettes from down here. Another gasp escaped me as I searched for air, but I stayed put. The cold encircled me, and I knew I was drowning.

I will stay loyal to my people and my family, I thought. *But I will always stay loyal to my heart.*

Then my body went numb and everything turned dark.

CHAPTER 19

"Filia?" The voice was familiar and sounded like someone I knew well. But it wasn't Dawson's voice.

I opened my eyes to see a dark brown face staring at me. He had a wide nose and midnight-colored hair. His eyes were a deep brown, and he looked much better than the last time I saw him.

"Iosefa?" I bolted up, my head throbbing as I did so.

Did I die? I hugged my oldest brother. My last memory of him was seeing him sick and pale.

And then Aunty Taimane told me she poisoned him… He wasn't supposed to be alive when we returned to Sunrise Kingdom. But here he was, standing before me.

"I'm so glad you're alive." Iosefa let out a shaky breath and stood back. I now realized we were in the castle. In fact, I'd been here before. I turned to see the doctor who had tended me when I fainted during the Fall Festival. He tipped his head.

"How are you feeling, Princess Filia?"

I rubbed my forehead. "A little tired."

My heart skipped a beat. It was only me, Iosefa, and the doctor.

"Where's Dawson?" Was he safe? Did I hurt him? I recalled that I was going to drown… but I didn't drown. I looked at my hands to find them empty. A bandage wrapped one of my hands, probably where the locket had pierced my skin. What had happened to the locket, or the knife? How did I

get out of the water? I was fully prepared to sacrifice myself in order to save Dawson, but what had happened?

“He’s been watching over you like a hawk,” Iosefa said. “I told him to get some fresh air.”

“Where’s Aunty Taimane? Iosefa, you have to find her. She—”

He put up his hand. “I know. She was trying to poison me?”

I nodded, then glanced out the window. It was evening… so had midnight passed? Was it safe for me to be around Dawson?

“Yes,” I said. “And she snuck a potion in my drink so that I have to kill Dawson before midnight.”

Iosefa nodded. “I know. The doctors realized I was being poisoned several days after you left. Malosi confronted Tevita, who had no idea about his mother’s doings. But he agreed to cancel your betrothal to him.”

“Really?” My eyes went wide. I was truly free? Aunty Taimane said she canceled the betrothal, but it sounded more official coming from Tevita himself.

“Yes.” Iosefa sighed. “He felt bad about it. He’s an honorable chief but we realized she was just trying to have you marry Tevita so she could get closer to and kill the rest of us, before killing you. Then her son would’ve ascended the throne.”

Everything was making sense. Iosefa continued. “Tevita was truly sorry. Anyway, I set sail as fast as I could, but we encountered a storm. I was so worried about you, Filia. I thought Taimane would knife you or something.” He shuddered, and I did too.

“Her plans changed, I suppose.”

A knock on the door prompted me to look down and check myself. I was wearing a thick white cotton nightgown, and my hair was braided. It was still slightly damp, but I felt quite comfortable. My bare legs and feet were under the blanket.

“Oh, and we had some stowaways,” Iosefa said, eyeing me. “Again.”

The door opened and my younger twin sisters jumped onto the bed. “Filia!” Their voices filled me with warmth as we embraced. “Filia, we heard *all* the gossip,” Atamai said, her straight dark hair flowing down her arms. Luni giggled and nudged me, her curly hair bouncing around.

“Why didn’t you tell us? We would’ve dressed as soldiers too and snuck on board with you just to get a good look at Prince Dawson.”

“Mmhmm,” Atamai agreed.

I rolled my eyes. “Girls, it wasn’t like that—”

“How was the Fall Festival? Can you show us around Alpenglow?” Luni cut in. “I can’t stop going outside. It’s so *so* beautiful!”

I couldn’t help laughing as they went on and on about the magic of the autumn season. “I know, I know,” I said, calming them down. “We’ll enjoy it before we go home, alright?”

“If you’re going home.” The new voice made my stomach flutter and we all turned to see Dawson standing in the doorway, arms folded as he looked at me, the corner of his lips turned up.

Iosefa beckoned for Dawson to enter, and I couldn’t stop the nervous excitement from humming throughout my body.

“Are you alright?” Dawson asked, stepping by the bed and taking my hand. My twin sisters looked at each other, then me, big smiles on their faces.

I nodded, then panic washed over me. I gasped. “Dawson, you have to stay away from me. I’m cursed—”

“It’s all taken care of,” he said, sitting and placing his arm around my shoulders. Embarrassment flooded me that he was doing this… *in front of my siblings!* But they didn’t seem to mind. I sure didn’t mind, especially knowing that I was no longer betrothed. “As soon as you dove into the water, I knew there was something off.” He winked.

“Which, by the way, that was a pretty crazy stunt you pulled. I dove in after you, but it was so hard to find you. I don’t know how you swam so deep, but…” He shrugged. “Luckily I found you, and just in time too.”

“It wasn’t a stunt.” I defended myself. “I was saving you.”

“I know.” He kissed my temple… in front of everyone. The twins nudged each other and I gave them a look. “I brought you to the doctor and he’s seen people who were cursed before, so he was able to give you a potion to reverse whatever curse fell on you.” Dawson made a face. “But it wasn’t hard to find the culprit. Your aunt didn’t deny anything.”

“So…” I scooted a little closer to him. “I’m not cursed?”

“Nope.”

I let out a whooshing breath and leaned against him. “I’m so glad.”

“I thought I lost you in that lake.” He then gave me a playful look. “Do you think you’re a mermaid or something, swimming that deep?” Dawson rubbed my shoulder and a giggle escaped me.

“Maybe.”

“She might as well be,” Atamai said. “She can hold her breath underwater for minutes on end.”

“And she swims better than any of us,” Luni added.

“Well. Not anymore,” I said, uncovering the blankets from my feet. The jaws of my siblings dropped. “This is what happened in the Pirate Wars.” It was about time my siblings knew.

Iosefa folded his arms. “That’s something we need to talk about, Filia. You know it’s against the law for women to fight in war.” He made a face, “Or to dress as a man to fight in the war. You know breaking the law results in punishment.”

“I know.” I bowed my head. “I’ll accept whatever it is.”

Before Iosefa could keep talking, there was a knock on the open door, and Dawson’s father, the king, stepped in. Atamai and Luni immediately got off the bed and straightened themselves out, curtsying. At least, if there was anything I taught them to do well, it was showing respect to those in higher authority than themselves.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“I was about to talk about the penalties she faces for breaking the law,” Iosefa said, adding, “Or pardons, I should say.” Wait… was Iosefa going to pardon me?

“Oh. Perfect timing.”

My throat felt tight. The king seemed too relaxed about consequences that would alter my life forever. “Filia.” He smiled at me, and it looked so cheerful and fatherly, it eased a little of my anxiety for whatever punishment he had coming for me. “Are you feeling well?”

I nodded. He shook Iosefa’s hand, then stepped towards me. “We have much to talk about.”

“Yes your majesty.”

“You lied to me, which caused your aunt to be placed in prison.” He wagged his finger. “Which, she does belong in prison. However, you are a princess, and you know better.”

“Yes, your majesty. I am so sorry.” I kept my eyes down on my hands in my lap. I fully deserved to be punished for lying.

“There are ways you can pay back the punishment, besides spending time in prison.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask.” At this, I did look up.

The king's whole look softened. "But Filia. You rescued my son. Not once, but twice."

I glanced at Dawson, who nodded, as if to confirm that he had spoken with his father.

The king continued. "When my son's ship was taken by surprise that night during the Pirate Wars, he could've died. But you rescued him." He let out a breath. "I cannot thank you enough, Filia." I expected to be chastised, scolded, and punished, but the king extended his arms to hug me. "Thank you," he said, and his words were full of so much emotion, I knew it meant everything to him. Just like Dawson, the king had lost loved ones too: his wife, and his daughter. He could've lost his son, if not for me.

"And you withstood a curse that was intended to kill my son," the king added as he pulled away. "I do not know the ways of magic, potions, or witchcraft, but I owe so much to you." He bowed, and all the jaws of my siblings dropped. I couldn't help my face from expressing shock either.

"For all that you have done for my family, for the crown of Alpenglow Kingdom," said the king, "I pardon you from your punishment."

Dawson rubbed my back, a big smile on his face. He must have known this was going to happen.

"I pardon you too," Iosefa said. "And not just because you're my sister. Not only did you save Dawson's life, but you saved many, *many* lives during the Pirate Wars. Your skills as a nurse are unparalleled, Filia. We would've lost nearly all the men of our kingdom if it weren't for you." He motioned to my feet. "You already paid a price for fighting in the wars. But what came of it has blessed hundreds, if not thousands of lives."

In spite of myself, I began to cry. Relief and gratitude filled me to the brim. Dawson pulled me close to him and I buried my head in his chest, every part of me illuminating with joy.

"And you should probably know one more thing," Dawson said. "Yesenia and I have broken off our engagement. You know what this means, right?" I looked up at him, remembering the hope that had sustained me through everything we endured.

"It means I'm not going to prison," I teased and my sisters laughed.

Dawson rubbed my arm. "I wouldn't let you near any prison. Will you marry me, Filia?"

One of my sisters squealed before I answered, but when I did, they jumped up with shouts of excitement.

“Yes, Dawson.” I fell into his embrace, then we shared a quick kiss. As we celebrated in that little doctor’s office, my heart was about to explode out of my chest. I was so, *so* happy. I glanced out the window at the autumn trees. This was a season of letting go, and letting go of my fears and secrets made room for so much more joy and love.

CHAPTER 20

I sat in the library, reading one of the botany books of Alpenglow Kingdom. Two days had passed since the whole lake incident. I caught a pretty bad cold from being exposed to the icy water and nearly drowning, but with hot cocoa, pumpkin spice, and cinnamon rolls, I was recovering quite well.

When I asked about my locket, Dawson said it must have sunk into the bottom of the lake, along with the knife. I was grateful to have had that locket because it served as a reminder to me of my sisters. But I no longer needed a physical object or even my sisters' hair to remind me how much I loved them. I always wanted to be honest and true for them, Dawson, and myself whether I had a reminder or not.

I parted on good terms with Princess Yesenia. But my heart did ache for her as she looked nervous about telling her father about the canceled betrothal. She assured me she would be fine, but I told myself I would keep in touch with her. She had been a true friend and princess when I needed her help.

Though I loved spending time with Dawson and my siblings, I was exhausted. Over the last two days, I attempted to keep up with Mallory and Vance as they showed Iosefa, Atamai, and Luni all the sights of Alpenglow Kingdom during the autumn season. I didn't have to try too hard to keep up though, because Dawson always stayed by my side. And I didn't mind lagging behind to have some private moments with him.

Dawson. I smiled as I looked up from the book into the fireplace. The crackling sounds filled the room, along with the leaves brushing against the window panes. I glanced out the window, finding the harvest moon. It glowed white with a creamish tint.

So beautiful. And I would get to live here!

A clicking sound drew my attention to the door, where I found Dawson coming in with a tray of hot cocoa and cinnamon rolls. The sweet aroma filled the air and I smiled as he sat and handed me the plate, the roll still steaming. Thick cream cheese frosting melted on the edges.

“Thank you,” I said, not hesitating to take a bite. The sweet roll was soft and light to the taste. There was a hint of butter, but it balanced perfectly with the sweetness. The cinnamon roll filled me with warmth.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Dawson asked.

I shook my head. “I had nightmares again… about the Pirate Wars.”

The prince moved closer to me so he could put his arm around my shoulders. I snuggled into him.

“I had nightmares tonight too,” he said. “But when I woke up, I reminded myself it’s all over.”

I nodded. Trauma was a real thing, but I was so grateful to have Dawson. We could understand each other because we both lived through the wars.

He noticed I was barefoot. “Aren’t your feet cold?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Usually people wear cozy socks during this season,” he said with a laugh.

“Maybe I’ll find myself a pair one day,” I said, then smiled up at him. “But I’m still an island girl, Dawson. I used to go around barefoot all the time, and now that my secret is out, I don’t have to hide anymore.” I grinned. “You can take the girl out of the island, but not the island out of the girl.”

Dawson rubbed my arm. “Ah yes. The little mermaid who fell in love with a dashing captain, then swam to his kingdom to be with him.”

I shrugged and giggled. “My story goes something like that.”

“I’m so glad that you’ve decided to stay though.” He pulled me closer. “Thank you for choosing me.”

“I would choose you over anything in this world,” I said.

“Even cinnamon rolls?” He winked.

“Even cinnamon rolls.” I kissed him, knowing that choosing him was a risk. Loving him was a risk. But it was all worth it.

The autumn wind continued to blow outside the window, the multicolored leaves scattering around like jewels. And I was perfectly happy inside this cozy library with my prince, my love. With him I didn’t have to be the perfect princess, I just had to be true to myself, true to him.

But just like autumn, where things were falling away, I knew times would come again and again, where I had to let things go. And when those moments came, I was fully prepared to remember this special fall season, this season that taught me how beautiful it was to let things go. Because letting go of the fears and anxieties always made room for love and hope.

THE END.

THE AUTUMN FAIRY TALES

The Autumn Fairy Tales is a collection of eight cozy retellings of your favorite fairy tales. Each book can be enjoyed in any order, so grab a delectable cinnamon roll and "fall" in love with the romance, pumpkin spice, and everything nice of these sweet and clean novellas!

Filia and the Fall Festival (A Little Mermaid Retelling)

by Leialoha Humpherys

Charlotte and the Cozy Cottage (A Rumplestiltskin Retelling)

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Frey and the Icy Orchard (A Snow Queen Retelling)

by Scarlett Luna Strange

Scarlett and the Dark Woods (A Red Riding Hood Retelling)

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by Callie Thomas

Callie and the Pumpkin Seed (A Cinderella Retelling)

by Sarah Beran

Astryn and the Golden Goose (A Princess Who Never Smiled Retelling) by M.J. Padgett

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And all gratitude goes to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the reason we always have hope. "Which *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19).

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~ More stories to come soon ~

Kaimana Island Duology

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Self Help

Aloha State of Mind

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About the Author

Originally from the Big Island of Hawaii, Leialoha Humpherys loves God, her husband, and good food, of course! She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Hawaii at Hilo. Her debut novel, *Aloha State of Mind*, a self help book about creating paradise where you are, was published in 2021 and has been followed by fairy tale retellings and epic fantasy novels set in ancient Hawaii and featuring Polynesian cultures. Leialoha loves the ocean, Hawaiian culture and folklore, and anything with coconut. She, her husband, and baby girl currently live in the small town of Santaquin, Utah and have fun making cool stuff together.

If you loved this book, please leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads! It means so much to me. Mahalo!!!

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